

The fine art of managing salespeople

So here's my guess; if you are managing salespeople there is a fair chance that you yourself have at some time been a salesperson too. Perhaps you combine both leading a team with selling personally. You might also be one of those sales superstars who was given the role of leadership just because you were good at selling. People like me normally bang on about this last category and respond with a smug smile and shrug of the shoulders as the client reports the difficulties that these people sometimes have in effective leadership. Well my view is that your most successful salespeople can and should be your sales leaders of the future but with one important proviso: that they treat their team in exactly the same way they treat their customers.

You don't have to go on a one-week residential training course to learn that selling at any level is a fine balance of interpersonal skills, commercial awareness and dogged persistence. Most successful salespeople report that their effectiveness is normally down to the extent to which they demonstrably understand their customer's business reality and how accurately they prescribe the solutions in their armoury.

Why would leading people be any different? Surely if you understand the specific needs of your people and apply your management style accordingly you will get great results. The sad truth is that many managers have neither the time nor inclination to understand their people properly and therefore adopt a blanket approach that all of their people have to adapt to. This is as ineffective as it is naïve.

So how well do you know your salespeople? Let's imagine that you just got your boss's job and had to hand your team over to someone else. Take out a piece of paper and write down all their names. Now

write down next to each name the name of their partner, the names of their children, where they last went on holiday, the date of their birthday (and their partner's birthday) and what their main interests outside of work are. So far, so superficial. Next write down this person's career goals – not what you think they are but what you know they are. If in doubt – ask! Now write down this person's three primary strengths and three primary areas for development. Against each of the areas for development write down exactly what YOU are doing about it. Finally write down the most effective means of managing this individual.

Those of you with a background in selling to major accounts will recognise the above as being very similar to an account plan. Managing people effectively is exactly like managing a major account. Staying close, building understanding and constantly adapting are key. Since your people are your success you should have a detailed 'account plan' for each of them and be constantly revising this as they themselves change and develop.

Some say the analogy of treating people like customers does not hold up when people don't perform. However if you have been in commercial life long enough you will have had the experience of having had to 'fire' a customer. A time when the customer's expectations of you became out of balance with your commercial needs as a supplier and you regrettably had to walk away. Sounds just like a persistently poor performing employee to me...

In the last two articles we discussed the fundamental importance of getting the right people and ensuring that they believe in their cause. Once these foundations are built, treating your people like customers will unlock enormous discretionary effort.



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