



The ABCs of Sales Coaching

Essential Tips to Amplify Your Team's Performance

By Michael Leimbach, Ph.D., VP of Global Research and Development, Wilson Learning Worldwide

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In today's sales environment—where product and service solutions and customer relationships are growing more complex—there is an increasing need to continually raise the skill level of salespeople. Managers play a critical role in making sure those skills are learned and used.

Statistics speak loudly that manager support/coaching is the number one action that can amplify organizational sales performance:

Organizations can gain a **29% increase in top-line salesforce performance** due to the skills of sales managers, independent of the skills of their salespeople.¹

Manager coaching has a great impact on performance over and above the impact of training alone. In our study, while just training salespeople resulted in a 43% improvement in performance, when manager coaching was added, overall performance improved 67%, a **24% improvement over training alone.**²

Unfortunately, sales manager coaching is at an all-time low, resulting in as much as 85% of sales skills never being used to drive performance.

Why aren't sales managers dialing up the decibels?

Barriers to Coaching Effectiveness

The reason managers are not dialing up the decibels is there are significant barriers buffering sales managers' effectiveness in coaching and supporting

their salespeople. Our research and experience shows the primary barriers to sales manager coaching can be summarized by three NO's:

1. No Time
2. No Skills
3. No Motivation

No Time: Real or perceived, the number one reason managers give for not coaching more is they simply don't have the time. What are they doing? Closing deals for salespeople, tracking performance, writing forecasts, and dealing with complaints from customers and executives. The thought of a lengthy coaching session with their salespeople is daunting to busy sales managers.

No Skills: Most organizations elevate their superstar salespeople into the management rank and expect the same degree of success as a manager, but often without a process to prepare them to coach. But the worlds of the salesperson and the sales manager are very different, as the chart on the following page shows.

As a result, many sales managers fall back on the skills they know best—taking over sales at the least sign of trouble, becoming the “super closer” and “Heroic Sales Manager.”

No Motivation: Organizational rewards drive sales managers to focus on monthly or quarterly results. Coaching is about building long-term capability. The sad truth is that spending time coaching salespeople is often a thankless activity; sales executives don't often care and salespeople don't always like their poor performance singled out. In addition, sales managers don't often understand the amplifying effect coaching has on top-line performance.

Scaling the Barriers to Enable Sales Managers to Be Better Coaches

One, two, or all three “NO's” may be barriers inside your sales organization, and while they may be real or perceived, there are ways to effectively hurdle them. Let's look at simple, but not simplistic, approaches to enable and equip sales managers to be better coaches.

Coaching Mindset

Coaching starts with managers; if they aren't motivated to initiate a coaching activity, nothing happens. Managers have to take on the mindset that coaching isn't something you “do,” rather, **a coach is who you are**. If managers view coaching as something they do “in addition to their real job,” it inevitably gets pushed out by more urgent tasks. Shaping a coaching mindset starts with a well-designed process to develop and support sales managers as coaches. If managers are left to learn how to coach on their own, organizations are failing to leverage the amplifying impact of a skilled coach—one we define as correcting, maintaining, improving, and stretching individual performance.

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The Salesperson World:	The Sales Manager World:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, direct measures of success—revenue, quota achievement, etc. • Clearly defined sales process • Clear understanding of how they contribute organizational value—revenue • Meaningful periodic recognition of performance—sales wins! • Hate rules and spend much of their time getting around them to serve customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vague or indirect measures of success (their salespeople’s performance) • Vague sales manager process, or no process at all • No clear definition of how they add value independent of the value contributed by their salespeople • No clear periodic performance recognition—it all comes at the end of the year

Coaching Skill Set

While there are many coaching models and approaches you could use with sales managers, our experience indicates the best approaches incorporate these three elements:

1. The most effective sales manager coaching is “curb-side coaching”—the 2- to 4-minute coaching conversations managers can have before and after sales calls.
2. The frequency of coaching is more effective than longer but infrequent coaching sessions. It’s better to have ten 4-minute coaching conversations than a 60-minute coaching session.
3. The simpler the coaching process, the better.

To accomplish this, many of our clients have adopted a short, simple, and easy-to-remember coaching process called “The ABCs of Sales Coaching.”

Of course, there are more detailed coaching models that are effective for in-depth events, life coaching, or executive coaching, but for sales manager coaching, many of our clients have found this simple process is much more effective. They give managers simple phrases to use and ways to easily slide into a 3- to 4-minute coaching event.

- **Align expectations:** “During the call, the Solution Selling program model suggests . . .”
- **Behavior observations:** “What I saw was . . .” “What I heard was . . .”
- **Coaching conversation:** “What do you think you should do differently in the future . . .”

Coaching Playbooks

Conventional wisdom tells us, “No job is too big with the right tool.” If a coaching playbook is well-stocked with specific instructions, worksheets, and coaching support information for conducting short coaching sessions related



About the Author

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Michael Leimbach, Ph.D., is Vice President of Global Research and Development for Wilson Learning Worldwide. With more than 25 years in the field, Dr. Leimbach provides leadership for researching and designing Wilson Learning's diagnostic, learning, and performance improvement capabilities. He has managed major research studies in sales, leadership, and organizational effectiveness, and has developed Wilson Learning's Impact Evaluation capability and ROI models. He has served as a research consultant for global clients, is on the editorial board for the ADHR journal, and serves in a leadership role on the ISO technical committee for Standards for Learning Service Providers. Dr. Leimbach is a published author and frequent speaker at global conferences.

to specific skills, busy managers can reach into it quickly. With the preparation and structure already done for them, their job becomes simply conducting a targeted coaching activity.

Our clients have found great success supporting their sales managers with a Manager's Playbook. This robust "tool kit" is based on the concepts and constructs of the core training program used to upskill the salesforce and consists of a series of coaching activities linked to the specific skills the salespeople learned. These tool kits have been implemented as e-books, physical books, and manager coaching portals.

Keep It Simple, Short, and Supported

Remember:

- Manager involvement is the single most important activity to increase use of selling skills.
- Managers need both sales skills and coaching skills.
- Frequent, short coaching conversations are better than periodic account/performance reviews.

How We Can Help You Amplify Sales Performance

More than just performance improvement, increasing the effectiveness of managerial coaching can result in increased retention, improved employee engagement, and a learning culture inside your organization that supports professional growth and innovation.

Which best describes your current approach to preparing sales managers to coach?

- We have a well-designed process to train and support sales managers in coaching.
- We have a training program specific to sales coaching.
- We have a generic coaching program for managers.
- Managers learn to coach pretty much on their own.

Let Wilson Learning partner with you to amp up your sales managers' coaching impact. We will work with you to ask the right questions, raise the right issues and opportunities, and, with expert intention, ensure your strategies are aligned to your desired performance outcomes.

To learn more, contact Wilson Learning at 1.800.328.7937 or visit our website at WilsonLearning.com.

¹ Sales Management as a Source of Competitive Advantage: How Sales Managers Add Value to the Organization, Michael Leimbach, Ph.D., Wilson Learning

² For Increased Sales Performance—Invest in Manager Training Executive Summary, Michael Leimbach, Ph.D., Wilson Learning