

Leading for Sales Performance: Can Your Sales Managers Answer These 5 Critical Questions?

BY MICHAEL LEIMBACH, Ph.D., WILSON LEARNING CORPORATION

Would you ask the best violinist in the orchestra to take over conducting without any preparation to be a conductor? Probably not. And if you did, you wouldn't have very high expectations for the orchestra's performance. Yet this is exactly what most organizations do. They promote high-performing salespeople into management roles without preparing them to be confident and competent in the critical areas of coaching, motivating, and developing their people.

It's not that companies don't recognize the value of the manager's role. When a group of sales executives was asked what was most important to improving sales performance, 88% answered, "making sales managers more effective," a finding consistent with a Sales Executive Council survey. At the same time, over 50% indicated that their organizations were not preparing sales managers to lead effectively. Given the sales manager's potential impact on performance, these companies are literally leaving money on the table in the form of smaller ROI for sales training, weak sales productivity, and higher turnover costs.

For a relatively modest investment, sales managers can be provided with the tools and knowledge to drive sustainable high performance. To target the handful of essential skills sales managers need, prepare them to answer five simple questions.

WHAT SALES MANAGERS NEED TO DO—THE FIVE QUESTIONS

Despite all the differences in sales force deployment, products, industries, competitive environment, and customers, sales teams share some core needs. When those needs are fully addressed, salespeople demonstrate higher levels of motivation and commitment, and greater effectiveness in working with their customers. Ultimately, well-managed teams will deliver more sales at higher margins than those who are poorly managed or simply left to their own devices.

To achieve top performance from his or her team, a manager needs the skills and tools to provide clear answers to five simple but profoundly important questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. What is expected of us?
3. How are we doing?
4. What's in it for us?
5. Where do we go for help?

Taken together, the Five Questions offer a roadmap for effective management and a guide to the key skills needed by a high-performing sales manager. In fact, our research shows that when a company's sales managers are able to answer these five questions, sales performance increases on average 29%.

1. Where are we going?

It's a given that salespeople have targeted objectives, in the form of their own assigned quotas and possibly awareness of the overall revenue goals for the team. But like most employees, salespeople want to believe that they are part of something important. Unfortunately, they are often left in the dark about how they fit into a larger picture, both in terms of the organization's business-critical issues and goals, and the direction and expectations for the entire sales force. Companies pursuing strategies of customer engagement, for example, need a sales team that is also engaged and ready to execute effectively at the customer interface—configuring solutions, delivering the right messages, etc. If the sales force is not connected to the overall business direction, they feel out of the loop, and are less able to carry out their role in achieving the broader business goals.

By communicating the company's vision, strategy, and challenges and how the sales team fits into the big picture, managers provide their teams with a sense of belonging to a larger whole and ensure their salespeople are able to make a meaningful contribution to the success of the entire enterprise.

2. What is expected of us?

It is easy to assume that once salespeople know what to do (i.e., “make your numbers”) and are properly compensated, the rest will take care of itself. But to fully succeed, the organization needs the kind of performance that leads to strong customer relationships, a continuous flow of referrals, and steady expansion of the business.

To achieve this level of performance, salespeople need to know not only what they are aiming for—the number they are expected to reach—

but how they are expected to reach it. How should they be interacting with their customers? How do they access and use sales support resources to follow up on the sale? What is the quality of the experience customers should be having with the salesperson and the company? How can they make it happen?

Managers should be able to articulate and communicate both quantitative results and qualitative expectations reflecting longer-term outcomes of the overall sales effort. To do so, they must be able to articulate expectations for the team and for each individual, and know how to communicate those expectations clearly and effectively.



3. How are we doing?

Almost every sales leader acknowledges the high value and core importance of coaching and feedback for salespeople. And almost everyone recognizes that these essential activities can easily get pushed to the back burner as managers juggle conflicting priorities. While lack of coaching is often attributed to a lack of time, many managers also lack the necessary confidence and skills to provide effective, timely, and useful feedback.

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To build a high-performing team, sales managers must be able to reinforce behaviors that lead to success, develop the skills of less-experienced salespeople, and strengthen areas of weakness. Does the team, or an individual, need to do a better job of discovering the customer’s real issues and requirements? Is a new salesperson having problems qualifying prospects? Is there an issue of call reluctance that needs to be addressed?

Unfortunately, many managers are uncomfortable giving what they regard as “negative” feedback, so avoid giving feedback altogether. Some provide the occasional “attaboy” type of general encouragement or praise that is not targeted to a specific situation or detailed enough to reinforce specific behavior.

To support, reinforce, and stretch performance, managers need to be confident and capable of having effective two-way conversations about what is going well and where there are opportunities for improvement. They also need to make specific suggestions for developing and strengthening needed skills and capabilities.

4. What’s in it for us?

Even if they don’t have any other help or support, most salespeople are provided with incentives in the form of bonuses, commissions, and other special awards for outstanding performance. These kinds of rewards certainly provide one kind of answer to the question of “what’s in it for me/us.” Whether it’s a trip to Hawaii, a financial reward for a big sale, or a plaque on the wall, providing some kind of tangible benefit is usually seen as both nec-

essary and sufficient to motivate high performance.

There are, however, intangible rewards that can have an even greater impact on motivation, and provide the sense of personal fulfillment that keeps salespeople energized and committed. The most important thing a manager can do in this regard is to provide meaningful recognition that is personal, specific, and timely.

Since what individuals find meaningful varies greatly from person to person, managers can be most effective when they understand sources of individual motivation and customize recognition and rewards accordingly. Managers who can do this see the results when their salespeople are inspired to deliver the “above and beyond” effort that raises performance from “good” to “great.”

5. Where do we go for help?

Most companies provide resources for the sales force, including sales tools, internal sales support, marketing materials, and the like. Unfortunately, organizational barriers often get in the way when salespeople try to round up needed implementation resources, get help in responding to a customer RFP, or find technical support to answer a critical question from a customer. The sales manager can play a key role in helping his or her people deal with other parts of the organization, ensuring that sales team members are able to access the help they need. Successful managers are able to communicate clearly about how well the organization is supporting the sales function, and can work with other functional leaders to orchestrate the kinds of resources needed by their sales team.

An equally important resource is again something only the sales manager can provide—time and direct support in the form of coaching, mentoring, and assistance in solving problems with customers. Salespeople who know the manager “has their back” will feel more confident, loyal, and comfortable in their role. They are more willing to take risks, take responsibility, and act on behalf of their customers when they know they can count on help from the organization and from their manager.

The Five Questions may not cover every possible aspect of what effective managers must know how to do, but they provide a framework and direction for enhancing sales management effectiveness. A manager who consistently sets clear expectations, provides effective feedback and meaningful recognition, and ensures salespeople have the tools and support they need to succeed will be rewarded with the benefits of a competent, committed team that delivers superior sales results.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHAEL LEIMBACH, PH.D.

Michael Leimbach is Vice President of Global Research and Design for Wilson Learning Worldwide. With over 25 years in the field, Michael provides leadership for researching and designing Wilson Learning’s diagnostic, learning, and performance improvement capabilities. Dr. Leimbach has managed major research studies in sales, leaderships and organizational effectiveness, and has developed Wilson Learning’s Impact Evaluation capability and return on investment models. Michael has served as a research consultant for a wide variety of global client organizations, is on the editorial boards for the ADHR professional journal, as well as serving a leadership role for the ISO technical committee TC232: Standards for Learning Service Providers. Michael has co-authored four books, has published numerous professional articles, and is a frequent speaker at national and global conferences.

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WILSON LEARNING CORPORATION
8000 W. 78th, Suite 200, Edina, MN 55439

Wilsonlearning.com 1.800.328.7937