A Pivotal Role Calls for Specialized Skills

In most sales organizations, the road to promotion is paved with individual results. Sales representatives often get promoted to District Manager (DM) mainly because they consistently hit their monthly sales targets. These top performers also have exhibited leadership competencies of some kind along the way, to be sure, but these are likely soft skills lacking any useful experience they can leverage. Then, while these DMs are still celebrating their new titles, they are saddled with an unfamiliar set of responsibilities that they are not effectively equipped to handle.

This counter-productive scenario plays out repeatedly in the pharmaceutical and biotech industries despite the pivotal nature of the DM role. The position is critical to the success of any sales force because it stands as a bridge linking sales leadership with the representatives in the field. The DM should be the most influential force in the professional lives of sales representatives, guiding their training and development and helping drive their sales results.

Research compiled by Alliance Performance Systems (APS) and our strategic partner, Huthwaite, Inc., shows DMs need a set of skills over and above traditional selling skills to be successful in their pivotal role. To be effective, DMs must be able to:

- Translate the high-level sales strategy of the organization into a specific, tactical plan for each representative
- Conduct comprehensive account and call planning for their territory
- Know when to participate in sales calls (and when to hold back)
- Represent their team to internal stakeholders
- Provide coaching to their team

Of these skills, the one that most often has the greatest positive impact on sales results is the one that is most misunderstood among salespeople: coaching.

Coaching is Key

Ask 10 sales managers what good coaching looks like and you will likely get 10 different answers. Most sales managers describe coaching in terms of modeling the same techniques that made them successful, correcting inappropriate behaviors when needed, and holding representatives accountable for results. Each of these activities has a place in sales management, but they are not coaching, in the strict sense of the word.

In an excellent position paper on the subject titled, Coaching Decoded: A Practical Guide for Managers, Huthwaite defines coaching as “honoring the skills already trained.” Research shows that coaching is a distinct skill set from selling—a skill set that can be learned through training.

To ensure success in their pivotal role, newly-minted DMs need a comprehensive sales coaching training platform built on these and other research-based key success factors.
Leaders working to build successful sales organizations should not assume top-performing representatives will be able to impart to others what made them successful. These reps-turned-District-Managers need comprehensive training that emphasizes coaching.

Effective DM training begins with identifying what successful sales coaching looks like. APS has leveraged its decades of experience working with leading major account sales organizations to identify the key characteristics of coaching sessions that produce measurable—and sustainable—positive results. APS has found that the most effective coaching sessions:

- Are most often conducted in person, ideally, with the DM observing skills applied over several calls. Since this is often logistically impractical, timely reinforcement and follow-ups should occur via distance-learning methods such as strategic video/teleconferences, webinars, or other web-based e-learning options;
- Are scheduled well in advance, so the representative has time to schedule calls to observe;
- Are not part of the normal ride-along schedule because the DM’s attention must be focused on the representative’s performance, not on the customer;
- Are focused on one or two specific, measurable, priority behaviors that will be practiced and observed;
- Include specific and thorough pre-call planning;
- Include a debrief period structured to enable the DM to provide positive feedback, and the representative to identify what behaviors or actions might have made the call more successful; and,
- Are followed within 48 hours with written feedback that can be used as a reference for future coaching sessions.

Comprehensive Sales Coaching for Success

While none of these key characteristics of good coaching are trade secrets, our research indicates new DMs are often unaware of them, nevertheless. Frequently, we find they lack the innate ability to identify best coaching practices and cannot develop them without guidance.

To ensure success in their pivotal role, newly-minted DMs need a comprehensive sales coaching training platform built on these and other research-based key success factors. This should include ample opportunity to role play key account calls with reps and observe real-life scenarios.

When reinforced often enough, effective coaching will help new managers develop consistent baselines for evaluating members of their sales team and identify key behaviors to improve, resulting in measurable—and sustainable—positive results for the entire organization.

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