



Changing Sales Behaviors

Remember & implement these three steps

by: Troy Harrison, Troy Harrison & Associates

I have said before in this space that sales managers earn their money by developing and improving the performance of their salespeople through a process that I call “profitable behavior change.” In this case, “profitable” means that the company and the salespeople make more money from the change. “Behavior” is the way the salespeople handle all parts of their jobs; usually we focus on external, customer-facing behaviors, but sometimes you need to improve internal behaviors and relationships with co-workers. And we all know what “change” means.

Whether you have a team of low performers, high performers or a mixed bag, your job is to help your people perform better — at least up to their abilities to do so.

I am not a fan of high turnover. It is damaging to your company culture, your sales team’s morale, your customer relationships and, frankly, your own mindset. Sometimes you do have to fire someone, but I like to think that I can look myself in the mirror and comfortably say “I’ve done everything I can to help him (or her) succeed” before I fire him. That is where a process of profitable behavior change comes in.

Profitable behavior change is done in three steps: training, coaching and accountability. Entirely too many managers (or owners) skip the first two steps and go straight to accountability. We hire them, they do not get results, we dictate and then we fire them. That is lame, it is unfair and it is unprofitable. Let’s take a look at these three steps in a little more detail.

Training is the structured transfer of knowledge in a teaching environment. Essentially, training is built around the idea that there are certain things we want our salesperson (or employee) to know, so we are going to create a structured method of teaching him these things. The knowledge could be about sales process, sales methodology, the company’s products, services, culture, business processes or any other pieces of knowledge he needs in order to do the job correctly.

What distinguishes training from coaching is its pre-planned nature and objectives. Training creates a baseline of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques that you expect your people to know and implement. It lays out how you want business to be done and how you want your customers to be treated. It is not a step to be skipped or shortcut.

Training should begin during the 90-day onboarding period after you hire a new salesperson. When should it stop? Never. Ongoing training reinforces and refreshes what has been taught before, and it should also advance and build on the skills baseline with new skills and techniques.



Sales training is not a one-time cure-all for what ails your sales team (I probably should not say that, since sales training is a big part of my business, but there it is). Sales training is an excellent way to build your team members’ skills, but it loses much of its effectiveness if it is not continually reinforced and refreshed by management.

Whatever sales training program you choose, it should be part of your sales culture and language, and it should be consistently updated to keep pace with changing buyer preferences and expectations (and the pace of that change is at an all-time high right now). What is “tried and true” might be tried, but it might not necessarily be true now.

Coaching is also a transfer of knowledge, but it is far less structured. Coaching, done properly, is an ongoing process of skills improvement that has no fixed beginning, no fixed end and no preset curriculum. Coaching involves observing your salesperson’s behavior in a real-life selling environment (such as a ride-along for a face-to-face sales call, or a listen-in for a phone or video sales call), finding opportunities to improve the way his customer reacts to his selling, and then helping him to build his skills in whatever area of selling you observe.

The biggest mistake that sales managers make when they

attempt to coach is that they end up taking over the sales call and try to make the sale for the rep instead of letting the rep fail if necessary. I know that is difficult. In fact, it was the most difficult thing I ever had to do as a sales manager. It is excruciating to watch a sales call go wrong when you know exactly how to make it right. The thing to remember is that your job is to improve the rep's skills on every call he makes. If you step in and sell, you are only helping him on one particular call. You cannot always be there.

The second biggest mistake is to dictate instead of persuade. Coaching is not a dictatorial process of "You must do this." Rather, it is a persuasive process of "If you do this, here's how you'll benefit." Use your selling skills in coaching, remembering that you are trying to sell your rep on a new course of action.

The final method of profitable behavior change is the least fun — accountability. Now, you are not persuading. "Holding someone accountable" means that you are acknowledging the salesperson is deficient in some aspect of his job, that you will not accept that deficiency and that he must correct it. This could be activity-based (maybe he is not hitting his activity numbers), it could be skills-based (perhaps he refuses to implement a critical sales skill despite having been trained and

The thing to remember is that your job is to improve the rep's skills on every call he makes. If you step in and sell, you are only helping him on one particular call.

coached on it) or perhaps he is not treating co-workers well.

Now you have to say, "Do this or else these consequences could come to you." That does not have to mean termination. It could mean losing territory or customers, entering a probationary period or other smaller, short-term consequences. One thing to remember is this: In all but the most extreme behavioral problems (e.g., lying to customers, maltreatment of co-workers, etc.), you

do not have the standing to hold someone accountable for a behavior unless you have trained and coached him on it already. At some point, if he simply refuses to succeed, yes, you have to terminate him — but it is a progressive process.

Profitable behavior change is possible, it is enjoyable and it is the best way to build your team's results. Remember and implement the three steps and you will be fine. ■

Troy Harrison is the author of "Sell Like You Mean It" and "The Pocket Sales Manager." He helps companies navigate the elements of sales on their journeys to success. To schedule a free 45-minute Sales Strategy Review, call (913) 645-3603 or email troy@troyharrison.com. Visit www.troyharrison.com.

