

(1) Set the stage properly. Before diving into any scenario, I always tell my team that perfection is not the objective. This is a safe space for learning and reinforcing important techniques. When salespeople know they will not be judged harshly for missteps, they engage authentically and absorb lessons more effectively. It is a simple concept, but most managers skip this step entirely. They jump straight into the exercise without establishing psychological safety.

(2) Keep it focused. Here is where a lot of managers go wrong — they try to role play entire sales calls. Do not do that. Instead, isolate specific components. Maybe it is two strategic questions, a brief product demonstration or a particular objection-handling technique. This targeted approach allows for deeper practice and clearer feedback without overwhelming participants or eating up your entire meeting. It also reduces the opportunities for public failure.

(3) Run the role play correctly when you are playing the “customer.” This is critical. As the sales manager, your job is not to be the toughest prospect your salespeople will ever encounter. My philosophy is simple: Make it easy for them to succeed when they are executing the technique correctly. Only become a challenging customer when they veer off course — and even then, stop quickly before you grind them into powder.

When salespeople nail the technique, reward them with a cooperative “customer” response. When they struggle, provide

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just enough resistance to highlight the learning opportunity, then course-correct before frustration sets in. The goal is to build confidence and competence, not break spirits or demonstrate your own superiority.

Remember, the person participating in your role play is not just learning a sales technique — he is exposing himself to potential embarrassment in front of his peers. That takes courage. Respect that courage. Honor it. Use it to build him up, not tear him down.

Master these three elements and you will see your team members’ attitudes toward role playing completely transform. Instead of groaning when you announce practice time, they will start seeing it as valuable preparation that makes their real sales calls feel effortless. More importantly, they will see you as someone who invests in their success rather than someone who enjoys their failure. That is when role play becomes what it was always meant to be: a competitive advantage disguised as training, not a weapon disguised as development. ■

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.

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