

Promoting top sales producers to managers - Think Again

It is one of the oldest clichés in sales: "What happens when you promote your top sales rep to a manager? You lose your top sales rep and gain your worst manager." Chances are many readers of this completed the statement before reading the answer. Why, then, do so many companies continue a practice that sales executives deride? A vacuum of viable career options, unset expectations, and a culture of "earning your stripes" are just a few of the answers that plague sales organisations today.

Unfortunately, there's not much research based on the performance data of managers who have been promoted from top performing sales reps versus those who were either moderate sales reps or had no sales experience.

However, there's ample data to prove that the behavioral profiles of those who succeed in the two roles are dramatically different, meaning that those who succeed as sales managers are not the same as those who succeed in direct selling.

A seller's business attitude heavily influences his ability to succeed. If an individual possesses a progressive attitude about business in general by seeking to use new strategies and techniques in his role and always striving to reinvent his work, he has a leg up on other salespeople. On the other hand, a strong sales manager seeks a more conventional approach, in which success relies on what is proven instead of on the latest fad.

Another key difference is a star salesperson's need for stress in his or her environment. For better or for worse, data shows that higher levels of stress are conducive to top performing representatives, while more moderate levels are needed by managers. Spend one day in most sales organisations where a top performing rep has been promoted to manager and you'll see a nearly manic environment in which tactical and strategic changes are the only constant. While the team may be able to adapt and change, these are not practices that lead to results.

While the things that make a salesperson successful are related to culture, personality and cognitive skills are more important for a leader.

One example of these leadership skills is verbal reasoning ability. Without the ability to rapidly and effectively process and communicate information, the chance for success is diminished. This is connected to the importance of "mental flexibility" or one's ability to

"think on his feet." While not as critical for the rep, the leader must be able to rapidly think through scenarios and adapt to a changing environment to maximize performance.

Interestingly, as substantial as the differences are, similarities exist as well. Both top salespeople and top sales managers need something called "leadership impact," which is willingness to take action when the situation requires it. Basically, can one take charge and lead naturally? Both star salespeople and star managers must possess this in abundance. A sales representative must lead the prospect, while a manager must lead the team.

All of this discussion of behavioral characteristics really boils down to one simple fact: You must understand the differences between successful salespeople and managers to understand how to (or if you should) promote. What if the top performing salesperson is not the right fit for a management role? Are you necessarily going to lose him or her to another company's sales management opening? Not if you've thought through suitable career path alternatives for the sales professional.

You've got to have a place for top sellers to advance. Too often, the alternative to management is more cold calling with a higher commission level. Other paths could include more strategic prospects such as national accounts, project-based leadership in which a sales rep manages an ad-hoc sales team to land one client, or training and mentorship opportunities. Whichever components you include in your sales professional career path, it must be thought out and communicated. Too often, a senior sales executive or HR professional believes that these options exist while field sales reps have not been adequately sold on why this may be a smart career move for them.

Selling your sales team on why progressing their careers along a sales professional line instead of management must start early — as early as the initial recruitment process. It comes down to setting adequate expectations at the start and following through with your actions.

The reason why most sales people expect to one day be promoted to managers is precedent. Unfortunately, this is still the most common practice in companies. "Sell your heart out and one day you'll manage a team of your own," is the motto. You can change this by informing all sales candidates, pre-hire, that this is not the practice in your organisation. By carefully illustrating that there are other good paths for their careers besides management, and by showing clearly what those options entail, you can help the potential rep select the most appropriate role for him or her. When combined with constant reinforcement of this message at review time, a deliberate decision can be made by both rep and manager on the best course for the rep's career.

To promote the sales managers who will drive your company's bottom line growth, you need to understand the unique role of the sales leader and what type of person is needed. You must then provide options to retain those who are great sellers but stand little chance of success as a manager. And, you must communicate and sell the alternatives to your current and future team members.