

The Fine Art of Coaching

by Jay Cross



JAY CROSS IS OMEGA'S MULTIMEDIA EVANGELIST. HE HAS HELPED MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED BANKS IMPROVE THEIR BOTTOM-LINE PERFORMANCE.

Coaching is a vital component of the sales manager's job but most senior managers need to do more to develop their managers' coaching skills.

Everyone's in favor of coaching. The very word "coach" brings up images of great motivators like Vince Lombardi, Leo Derocher, Bill Walsh, and Pat Riley. The coach calls in the winning plays. The coach inspires a group of unruly individuals to work as a perfectly coordinated team.

But we must remember that there are good coaches and there are bad coaches.

Almost everyone has a horror story about some misfit high-school football coach, a true-life example of a coaching at its worst. You've heard this coach described before--making idle threats was his favorite form of motivation. He promoted individualism over teamwork. He berated weaker players. He told the team they were losers--and they proved him right.

Hopefully, you'll never see this type of coaching style used within your own organization. It may be time, however, for you to evaluate your sales managers' coaching skills. Coaching provides sales managers with the opportunity to guide their team members and help them improve their performance. Are your sales managers really "getting into the game" by assessing past results relative to the objectives? Or are they just checking the scoreboard from the

sidelines?

Renaissance Results

Let's think about what qualities make a great coach. A countryman once asked Michelangelo how he sculpted his masterpiece David. Michelangelo replied that the statue was in the marble all the time. All he had to do was to chip away the rough edges.

Successful coaches are gifted sculptors. They bring out the hidden talents and skills within the individual members of their team. These coaches don't create new sales people. Instead, they recognize and reinforce talents that are already there. Good coaches are good modelers.

Successful coaching involves the hands-on development and nurturing of individual employees, as well as keen communications skills. Imagine what the Sistine Chapel would look like if Michelangelo had been given instructions in the form of a few memos or e-mails from Pope Julius and had attended a quarterly pep rally.

To create a true sales organization, senior managers must meet face to face with their front-line managers and help them build the confidence needed to wield their mallets and chisels with conviction. Only through the peak performance of both managers and employees will they ultimately realize their sales goals.

Conversely, the expert sculptor does not dull his/her chisel trying to coax a masterpiece out of a flawed block of marble. Nor should your managers try to make all individuals sellers if they just don't have it in them. If some team members are not able to play, get them off the field.

How-To in Four Steps

We've found in our workshops that coaching doesn't come naturally to most branch managers, but it is a skill they can readily learn. Omega workshops stress that sales managers need to employ two types of coaching. The first is coaching on the job; the second we call focused coaching.

Coaching on the job means observing members of the team interacting with customers. More than managing by walking around, this type of coaching requires joining conversations between customers and the seller as an observer. The coach evaluates the seller's behavior, frequently using a checklist of ideal selling steps. Only by observing sales situations and describing what did and did not take place can coaches reinforce team members' effective behavior by catching them doing something right.

Periodically, perhaps once a month, the sales manager also conducts focused coaching sessions. These participatory meetings are quite unlike the one-way performance reviews they replace. In those old-style meetings, the manager generally evaluated performance and provided instructions on how to improve. This belittled the employee and rarely changed behavior. It was not a very effective way to coach.

In a focused coaching session, both the employee and the manager participate. In fact, the employee normally does most of the talking by assessing his or her own performance. The manager provides positive and developmental feedback, both integral parts of coaching.

Focused coaching sessions should never be conducted unannounced. After scheduling a meeting, both the manager and seller should prepare for it by reflecting on what's happened since the previous session. A seasoned coach facilitates the focused coaching session with four steps:

1. **Agree on agenda.** The coach reiterates the purpose of the session and asks whether the

employee has other matters to discuss.

2. **Ask first.** The coach asks the employee to assess his or her performance since the last session. The coach asks about results, activities, and behaviors. The coach asks the employee to present an Action Plan for the next period. Finally, the coach summarizes his or her understanding of what's been said.

3. **Share ideas.** At this point, the coach suggests specific actions and behaviors to improve performance and asks for the employee's reaction. They mutually deal with obstacles and issues. The coach offers information and brainstorms ideas. In addition, the coach summarizes key action steps that they have mutually agreed upon.

4. **Agree on action plan.** The coach checks for the employee's commitment to the Action Plan. The coach expresses confidence and offers support. The coach then asks the employee to summarize the next steps.

Focused Coaching Works

I recently took part in a coaching skills workshop that Omega conducted for fourteen branch managers of a major Southwest bank. The workshop leader described Omega's focused coaching model and explained how it encouraged sellers to take responsibility for their own improvement. We talked about how this approach could make people more effective--and simplify our lives as managers.

Learning By Doing

The best way to learn something is by doing it. We first watched videotapes of two bank sales people on the job--folks who could obviously benefit from coaching. Then we broke into pairs. We each took a turn conducting a mock focused coaching session

with one of the test bankers we'd seen on video. And we videotaped ourselves doing the coaching.

Everyone got quite wrapped up in the exercise. Each branch manager was his or her own worst critic, but most did a good job of following the four steps and gaining agreement for improvement.

In their critiques after watching the videotapes, the branch managers identified numerous coaching skills that they believed were key to significantly improving employee performance, such as comparing performance to goals, expressing confidence in the employee, focusing on specifics, giving concrete examples, using "thank you"s, making objectives clear, praising what's going well, probing for causes of problems, checking for understanding, and setting specific follow-up activities.

Three months later, most of the managers reported great success with the coaching model. They felt better about the way they were working with their teams--and the team members were more satisfied with their own accomplishments.

A good coach significantly contributes to the success of any organization, whether it's a football team or a bank. The coach is ultimately responsible for developing a winning game plan, communicating the objectives and modeling desired behaviors. He or she observes team members as they do their jobs, provides feedback on individual performance and then rewards a job well done. If your sales managers are sitting out on the sidelines, reviewing reports instead of actively participating in the game, some other team will walk away with the win.