

talking point

Why? How? What? The art of juggling in sales management

by Alan Nelson

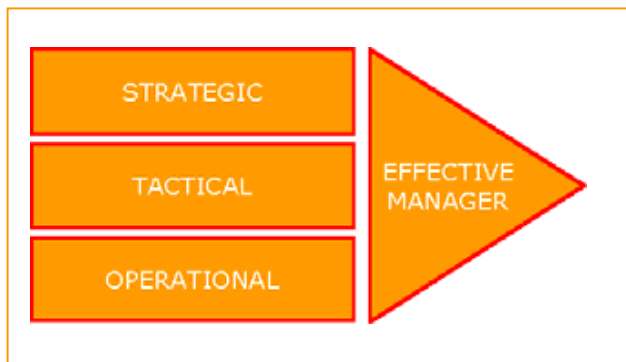


Every manager has to juggle different responsibilities, but for the sales manager this problem is especially acute, made worse by their geographical isolation from their team and from other colleagues with similar roles.

Devising development programmes for sales managers is therefore a challenging but rewarding experience and we have found that this is the ideal place for a blended solution, combining face-to-face traditional workshop style courses with the opportunity to continue to learn online and connect with other people in similar roles. The pay-off can be enormous, with changes in attitudes skills and knowledge driving performance gains throughout the team.

Defining the challenge

The most effective managers operate successfully on three levels: strategic, tactical and operational.

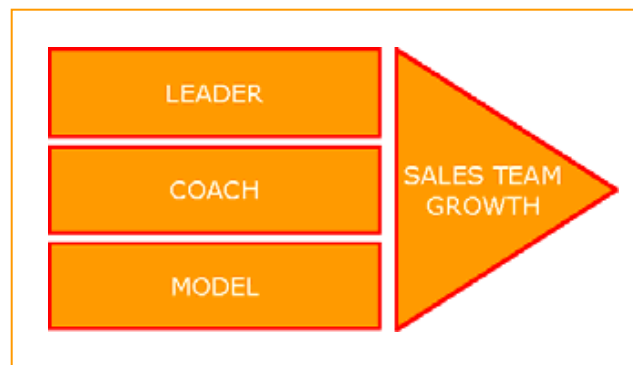


We call this “the why”, “the how” and “the what”. Coping with all three involves developing a broad range of skills and being prepared to switch from one role to another during the course of a single. For the sales manager, this can be a real stretch

Leader: they must provide leadership to their team, creating and communicating the strategic direction that will align the team’s efforts with the company goals.

Coach: They must be expert coaches, motivating their team with appropriate reinforcing and corrective feedback.

Model: They must be the model sales person, able to help with major deals and at key points in the sales cycle, always being an exemplar of the behaviour and style they want their team to adopt.



These roles not only require different skills and knowledge, they also involve different behaviour – what works when discussing strategy with senior managers may be different from what works with the members of the team or with customers. Get this wrong and you present a Jekyll and Hyde character to your team that will confuse them. More on this later. First let’s look at the three different levels in turn.

Leadership in sales management

At the strategic level, the sales manager provides for their team the “why” of what they are doing. To do this effectively they need four main skills

Strategy development: All managers face the issue of having to manage up and down. They must align with the corporate vision and goals, but also keep things relevant for their team. But sales managers have an added role. They are the front line connection with customers. They have to ensure that they can support corporate goals in the context

of meeting customer needs and reacting to competitive pressures.

Goal translation: Next they must manage the process of translating the corporate strategy through the levels of the organisation, creating team plans and individual targets. Good goal translation aligns the efforts of the team and motivates and excites them as well.

Measurement and Management: It's not enough to set targets – you have to monitor performance against them as well and no one knows this more clearly than the sales manager. Everyone in the organisation knows whether the sales team are on target – not always an enviable position to be in. So the monitoring of statistics on lead generation, sampling, proposals, closure rates, repeat business etc is critical. The way a sales manager handles key meetings – a pipeline review meeting for example – will go a long way to determining culture of the team.

Development plans: As well as targeting and measuring their teams, intelligent sales managers plan for the future. They know that creating imaginative development plans for the individuals in their teams is key to their long-term success.

Alongside all these leadership tasks, sales managers also play a key role in liaising with other departments, setting up positive and effective relationships and removing obstacles that prevent their team from achieving their targets. This requires another set of behavioural skills – managing a relationship where there is no hierarchy involved.

Coaching

Successful sales managers are great coaches. They help their team understand “how” to do what they do. There is an increasing trend to employ specialist sales coaches or to delegate this responsibility to the training department. While this is important, it does not mean that sales managers can wash their hands of it themselves. Through effective coaching, sales managers communicate and reinforce the way they want people to behave, sending messages out to their team as a whole through the way they deal with each individual.

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Effective Feedback: Good coaches can provide pinpointed feedback either to reinforce positive performance or to correct poor performance. Whether they are seeking to reinforce or correct, they are able to do it in a motivating way. Effective feedback should instil in them the belief you have that they can succeed.

Active questioning: Just as questioning is critical in understanding a customer and involving them in the sale, the same is true when coaching. If the objective is to change people's behaviour, then understanding them and involving them in their own discovery of the problem is key. Many people find this hard – somehow the skills that they practice every day with customers elude them when dealing with their own staff – “But these people work for me – I pay them – why should I have to ask questions and involve them? If I can see what's wrong, I should just tell them!” It is an easy trap to fall into, but people are more likely to change if they believe they have had a part in recognising the problem.

Resourcing: The sales team should see the sales manager as a resource. They are there to help them and ensure that nothing gets in the way of them achieving their goals. So availability is critical. Sales managers must give their time generously. Sometimes additional resources are needed at key moments, but often the best help comes from removing obstacles that are preventing people from being as effective as they could be.

Supporting: Sales people need to feel supported in order to succeed. However, they do not want their sales manager to go so far as to end up doing the job for them. Good coaches know when to stop and so they avoid taking over. They don't take the credit, but instead stretch and challenge their team.

Being the Model Sales Person

The sales manager must be the model sales person. This is where the sales manager helps the members of the team directly with “what” they have to do. Many sales managers hold a few key accounts themselves and they frequently become involved with major deals at key moments – their skills can help to land the business and their involvement demonstrates to the potential customer that they are being taken seriously.

When playing this role, it is critical that they exemplify all the behaviours they want from their sales team, both in front of the customers and also in front of sales staff.

A Cautionary Note

Attempting to juggle these different responsibilities is hard. It is all too easy to focus too much on one at the expense of the other two. In each case this can lead to problems.

The “Big Why” spends all their time being the leader. The risk is that they lose touch with the issues affecting their team’s success. They can quickly lose the confidence of their team who come to see them as distant and separate from the day-to-day realities of the sales process.

The “Big How” spends too much time as a coach, risking leaving the team without a clear sense of direction on the one hand, and without a sense of urgency on the other. Much though a collaborative approach to management is best in more and more sales circumstances, the team also needs to see clear leadership at times.

The “Big What” takes on too much of the burden for the sales themselves turn and ends up as a heroic failure. Their behaviour becomes self-perpetuating: by always taking over on big deals or keeping all the key accounts to manage themselves, they remove those opportunities for growth from the members of the team.

The Art of Juggling – getting started!

Getting this juggling act right is hard.

Getting it right over a prolonged period of time is very hard. All the roles require strong communication and people skills and they need to be applied in different ways at the different levels.

Many sales managers can feel pretty isolated when it comes to their own development. There is unlikely to be someone at the next desk with the same issues, so they may decide they need outside help. Our experience is that although face-to-face sessions can achieve a lot by waking us up to the things we need to think about, it is all too easy to drift back into old habits afterwards. So we have found that a blend of face-to-face workshops and online learning can achieve remarkable results: face-to-face for that “road to Damascus” moment and online for working on something over a longer period of time and for establishing a dialogue with people in similar positions.

Remember though, no one development programme can solve the problem for you – it requires a continued preparedness to evolve: a combination of self-awareness and readiness to change.

Alan Nelson is co-founder of Nelson Croom. Before setting up Nelson Croom, he was the CEO of Thomson Learning's activities in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Alan had spent the last 15 years in educational publishing. He has been at the forefront of the development of learning materials on the web.

This article outlines the basic theory underlying the Nelson Croom sales manager programme