

“Why Sales Training Doesn’t Work”

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It's estimated that globally corporations spend between \$4-7b a year on training sales professionals and yet research* suggests that 90% of sales training programmes result in a 90-120 day increase in sales productivity but shockingly, fewer than 20% of companies show a productivity increase that lasts over a year. Why is this?

In this 24/7 world in which we live companies are tasked with delivering improved results continually. This requirement for improved results often leads businesses to conclude one area key area to look at is in how the organisation sells to and manages its customers; after all, all revenue comes from someone buying our goods and services. This clearly accounts for the focus and investment in sales training.

The problem comes when organisations and sales leaders are driven by short term mindsets which mean they want to achieve that improvement by a quick and easy fix, usually one that doesn't actually involve them, because they feel they are already maxed out. Consequently much sales training that is put in place is beset by lack of time and quality of thought and ends up putting in place tactical, quick fixes that do not actually address the key issues but appear to “tick a box”. The harsh reality is;

- Training does lead to improved performance and better results BUT
- Improvement requires change
- Change requires focus, effort and resources

Inertia is an incredibly powerful force. If a sales development initiative fails to create changes, fails to get people actually doing things differently, what happens? “If you do what you've always done, you will get what you've always got”. That illusive improvement that's needed will never happen. The time and money that has been spent on training will have been squandered.

So what needs to happen to make sales training pay back?

The role of the Sales Leader

Firstly and most importantly senior sales management needs to be closely involved from the beginning to the end of any initiative designed to make an impact on their organisation. Ownership of this cannot be outsourced. It must be driven and supported from the very top. HR, Learning and Development, line management should also be closely involved but it has to be the job of the sales leader to lead crucial initiatives that are designed to drive sales results. Given that sales leaders are accountable for the sales numbers, If they do not think sales team development is absolutely their role then surely it must imply that they don't think that it has a material effect on the numbers and the results; and if that's case one has to question why spend the money in the first place! It's a bit like the football coach saying that he'll run the administration and let someone else get on with the job of training the players.

Strategic Initiative vs Knee jerk reaction

So sales leaders have to face into the issues and identify clearly what are gaps between the performance that he/she needs to meet corporate objectives and the current performance and then identify what really needs to change to bridge that gap. Is it calibre of people? Is it the commercial process? Is it the knowledge required or the skill level needed to execute the process? Is it the motivation of the team? or most likely a combination of several of these factors. The sales leader then needs to develop a strategy to create the necessary changes. So the impetus for sales training then becomes a strategic initiative to achieve corporate results not a knee jerk, tactical response to isolated behaviours or phenomenon. The training and development solutions that are then sourced and put in place are totally aligned to the business need and fully supported by the sales leader, sales management and other key stakeholders across the business. This means that that implementation is seen as a business imperative and is more likely secure the necessary time and focus.

More than a training event

To create effective change in sales people's behaviours takes more than a 1,2 or 3 day event. To think that, is to succumb to "tick box" thinking. "I've sent the sale force on a 2-day, "how to bring in the year end results course" so therefore we will achieve the numbers". A training event is not a magic wand; it will not create a sales force of princes from bunch of ugly toads! Before the training event is even scheduled a series of activities need to happen. What happens after the training event is more important still.

Metrics

Before any training is put in place the sales leader and their key stakeholders (HR/ L&D/ Line management) all need to be sure that the solutions chosen are high quality and practical. Metrics need to be put in place to measure the key indicators of success for the initiative. These metrics need to be quantitative, qualitative and process metrics. No one metric is ever going to give the whole story and there are always caveats but this should not be used to absolve sales management of the requirement to set metrics. Remember Peter Drucker's famous axiom "you can't manage what you don't measure". Of course this requires effort, and falls outside the quick and easy criteria, which explains why it often doesn't get done.

Communication

Another thing that need to happen well ahead of any events get underway is a clear communication programme, firstly to involve, inform and engage the sales management community so that they fully understand and buy-into the initiative and that they are fully equipped to support it once it's launched. Without the support of line management any change initiative will wither on the vine. Before anybody attends any events they should have a briefing from their line manager to set the context and help the individual focus on the parts that are particularly important for them!

Organisational Alignment

Finally no development initiative is an island. If the organisation wants people to do things differently, then it has to ensure that the world around them is conducive to them doing that. What is the point of sending someone on a course for long term, strategic account management if all their reporting requirements and bonuses are tied to new business development over the next quarter? This will create mixed messages which will probably encourage people to revert to business as usual. So if you want people to do something differently you have to ensure that the policies and structure around them are sending the same message, this probably requires a review of reward, remuneration, reporting, structure and equipment to ensure relevant alignment.

The Actual Event (s)

So the actual event or series events are probably the simplest part of the initiative. It requires some basic administration and smooth logistics to get an appropriate venue, a quality trainer, the right resources and to ensure the right people attend the right programmes. The most important part is probably the right communication that ensures that the sales people are aware of the reason for the development initiative and that they are equipped to prepare appropriately for the event(s). A key part of a training event should always be involvement from senior sales management to set the context and expectations of the delegates. Their very presence sends a message to the delegates about the importance (or otherwise) placed on the development initiative.

Post –Event Where the Rubber Hits the Road !

After the event is where “the rubber hits the road” to use an old sales saying! And this is where the majority of sales training goes horribly wrong. Sales people and sales managers traditionally return from their 1,2 or 3 day course to be greeted to a massive inbox, a pile of work and clamouring customers. The time and inclination to apply anything from the event is just not there, and anyway it’s much less time consuming just to do things the same way as usual. The dreaded inertia strikes again! If anything is to change for the better, twice as much effort needs to go into the implementation and consolidation phase than any other phase. What can keep sales people focused on the development agenda and not distracted by the ever present fire fighting requirements of commercial reality?

Senior Management Mandate

Senior management mandate is a good start! If the sales leader says this is critical and backs up his/ her words with supporting actions then sales people will take it seriously. If a development initiative is not clearly and consistently endorsed by senior sales management then it sends a message that it’s not considered that important; and if it is “optional” all but the most diligent learners will have other, more pressing things to spend time on. The results achieved by individuals and businesses are a function of what they do consistently. Sales management therefore have to insist on a degree of rigor and discipline if they are to succeed in creating change and improvement.

Coaching

Line management have to take an active and regular role in coaching in new skills and processes. For most people learning to do something differently is an iterative process. You need to do it, get some real world experience of it, get feedback, and apply it again. This is almost impossible to do in splendid isolation, and hence the critical importance of line managers coaching. An important distinction here is the ability of the line managers to coach the knowledge, skill or process not just focus on the deal/ the task in hand. This may mean that the line managers themselves require support to help them coach effectively. Going back to the football analogy, it’s like a manager spending a ton of time and money on a great players, great coaching staff, and weeks of training time to implement a killer formation and then when it’s actually game time saying, “it’s all right lads, you just do what you think is best”!

Integration

Given the fire fighting reality of sales people’s lives that I described earlier, many training initiatives fail because they are seen as incremental work for sales people who already feel overburdened. One of the key things to make development initiatives stick is to ensure that they are integrated where relevant with existing structures and processes. So for example when a new business development process is rolled out, it needs to integrate with the existing CRM system; it needs to integrate with the existing forecasting and reporting systems. It should also be used as the format by which sales people and their managers discuss and review the progress of opportunities. This way it’s not incremental work just an improved way of doing what is already being done.

Internal PR/ Communication

Lastly sales people are usually extroverts and very achievement driven. This needs to be harnessed in the service of the development initiative. Success stories need to be captured and published on intra-nets and newsletters, with due praise being given to relevant individuals. A good internal PR/ communication campaign is needed to support the initiative. When sales people start to see that changed behaviours resulting training initiatives have led some individuals to success and recognition they will want to be a part of that. Rewards and recognition need to be linked to the implementation of the development initiative as well as actual results. Conversely if nothing is seen or heard of a training initiative in the weeks and months following it, sales people feel safe in the knowledge that the latest management fad has just passed by without it having taxed them unduly!

Summary

A meaningful sales training initiative that will actually make a difference to the business requires a great deal of careful and strategic thought, management commitment, time and effort to set up and follow through. If an organisation doesn't have the resources or inclination to do this it is probably better off spending its money elsewhere! However a robust training initiative, well set up, well supported and well executed can make a fundamental difference to the results the sales team achieve and hence to the overall business success. So perhaps sales organisations should consider doing fewer, higher quality, better aligned training initiatives so that they can afford to put the time, resource and focus against making them work and deliver results for the business.