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Navigating the transition from sales to sales management.

For many successful and ambitious salespeople, their first move into sales management is perhaps the defining moment in their career. Some will succeed. Some will fail. Some will make the move and then wish they had never abandoned the simpler life of a salesperson. And some will remain perfectly happy avoiding the move and continuing in their role as a successful salesperson.

I'd like to look at this critical transition from three perspectives: how should sales leaders identify and evaluate potential first-time sales managers, how should salespeople evaluate the move as a career step, and what should newly appointed sales managers do in the first 90 days to lay the foundations for their future success?

Identifying and evaluating potential first-time sales managers

It goes without saying that any candidate for sales management must have demonstrated a track record of success as a salesperson. Sometimes, that's the primary consideration, appointing the current top-performing salesperson as the new sales manager. But being a good salesperson, although a necessary attribute, is only one of a number of qualities that are required in a successful sales manager.

Firstly, that success must have been achieved through a collaborative relationship with colleagues and by embracing company policies and strategies, and not as a "lone wolf". Go-it-alone salespeople – no matter what their current numbers might show – make terrible sales managers (and tend to fail as salespeople in the longer term, as well). Strong sales manager candidates will already have demonstrated a willingness to listen, learn and adapt, to collaborate with their colleagues, and to mentor less experienced salespeople.

Potential sales managers also need to demonstrate confident and effective communication skills across all levels of the organization: up, down, and sideways. And they need to want to do the job, and to be prepared for the changes that the new responsibilities will bring. Sales leaders – when interviewing potential candidates – need to be very clear about what the new role involves and what they expect from any new manager.

Salespeople considering a first step into sales management

The decision to apply for (or to accept) a first sales management role cannot and must not be taken lightly. On the one hand, success in the new role brings wider recognition and the potential for further career growth in the future. It offers the chance to demonstrate how you can influence and shape a team, and to achieve success through others. It will undoubtedly allow you to develop and demonstrate new skills.

On the other hand, the responsibilities of management

may bring potentially negative consequences. The role will almost certainly be more stressful, will often force you to make tough decisions, can create tensions with former peers, and will offer less opportunity for hands-on-selling. In fact, if hands-on-selling is the thing that gives you the greatest buzz – and you are not prepared to give it up – I strongly suggest you do not accept a management position. If you keep taking over from your team, they will never learn – and you will never be a successful manager.

The first 90 days as a new sales manager

As with most new roles, how you think, what you do and what you achieve in the first 90 days as a new sales manager will set the scene for the rest of your tenure. If your new team comprises your former peers, you have to demonstrate that there is a new relationship. This doesn't mean you need to suddenly switch from friend to foe, but some things will inevitably change. You simply need to clearly communicate what you expect from them and what they can expect from you – and to be willing to constructively confront negative situations in an emotionally intelligent way.

If you are to be an effective manager, you need to understand every member of your team. You need to identify their strengths and weaknesses, their personal priorities and motivations, and their opportunities for improvement. Without this, you'll be managing and coaching into a vacuum. You may find it helpful to have everyone complete a self-assessment, such as the one offered by Objective Management Group, and reflect the findings in their individual personal development plans and in your coaching regime.

This naturally leads to my next recommendation: coaching is probably your most important task as a manager, and you need to set sufficient time aside for it – and to coach in a systematic, structured, and disciplined way.



Coaching is most effective when it is based on a foundation of mutual respect and trust, and the frequency of coaching matters.

Research by Objective Management Group shows that frequency of coaching has a significant impact on performance. Salespeople who are coached on at least a weekly basis show a 9% increase in sales competence, and 17% if they are coached multiple times per week. Some critical sales competencies show even more impressive improvement at this level of sustained coaching: a 19% improvement in motivation and a 34% improvement in the willingness to accept responsibility – all of which translates into higher and more predictable sales performance.

Even as a brand-new manager, your own management will expect you both hit your targets and accurately forecast the revenues of your team from the get-go, and any consistent failure in either dimension can result in some very uncomfortable conversations. You must start by making sure that your team's pipelines are accurate, up-to-date and fully qualified.

Your first few opportunity and pipeline reviews with team members must serve to establish expectations. You have a window of opportunity to clean up the pipelines at the start of your tenure as a manager. You must ensure that clear and consistent standards are adopted for qualification, for order values, for close dates and for win probabilities. If necessary, you must define these standards if your organisation's own guidelines are vague.

When it comes to reviewing each individual opportunity, you must insist on seeing



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the evidence to support the salesperson's assertions. If you detect that salespeople are basing their assessment on hope or assumption, you must insist that they take steps to establish the truth – and you must ensure that salespeople are not punished if their honesty results in opportunities being reduced in value, extended in timescale, or disqualified completely.

The most likely consequence will be that in the very short-term, your team's pipeline values may appear to decline, but this is because the opportunities weren't accurate or real in the first place. You must warn your leadership (and your team) about this. But once things are cleaned up, you will be better able to identify where to focus your opportunity-level and pipeline-building coaching efforts.

It's not easy to become a good sales manager. Expectations will be high. You'll be on a steep learning curve. The eyes of both your team and your own management will be upon you. But if you take up the challenge, if you're both disciplined and open minded, if you become an effective coach, if you establish clear expectations and expect high standards from both yourself and your team, you'll have every chance to be successful.



About the author

Bob Apollo is the founder of UK-based Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners, the B2B sales effectiveness experts. Following a successful career spanning start-ups, scale-ups and corporates, Bob now spends his time as a coach and advisor to growth-phase technology-based businesses, equipping them to adopt the principles of Outcome-Centric Selling.