

FIVE STEPS TO BETTER SALES PERFORMANCE

How to coach your sales team to higher performance



SELL. SERVICE. MARKET. SUCCEED

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A giant gap exists in most organizations between the highest performing sales reps and everyone else. How is it possible that in the same environment and under the same conditions, some reps achieve outstanding results while others struggle just to make their quota?

The answer depends on the most critical role in any sales organization: the sales manager. On average, **one sales manager impacts the success of 10 or more reps.**

But instead of devoting time to coaching their teams to higher performance, managers spend their days distracted by the 14 meetings, 500 emails and 200 phone calls they handle in an

average week. As a result, a disconnect exists between what sales managers think their reps want and the reality of what reps need to be successful.

In **5 Steps to Better Sales Performance**, we reveal the proven methods the best sales managers rely on to close the sales performance gap between average performers and All-Stars. Featuring exclusive insights from high-performing sales leaders and original research by Professor Michael Ahearne, executive director of the [Sales Excellence Institute](#) at the University of Houston, this eBook explores the key sales performance behaviors you can put into practice today to transform your sales teams into “A” teams.

THE FIVE STEPS TO BETTER SALES PERFORMANCE

- 1 Be a Coach, Not a Manager**
Coaching will help you boost the performance of your all-stars, motivate average performers to reach the next tier, and elevate lower performers.
- 2 Set Daily Goals and Track Progress Against Them**
Holding others accountable is one of the core skills consistent among top sales leaders.
- 3 Motivate the Middle**
Sales managers who focus exclusively on top performers — or poor performers — are far less likely to be successful.
- 4 Focus on People, Not Process**
75% of sales leaders believe their managers spend too much time on administration and logistics that don't add value to the business.
- 5 The Best Feedback is Served Fresh**
Performance feedback gets stale quickly. Left unaddressed, minor issues quickly spiral into major ones.



BOOST YOUR SALES PERFORMANCE

Coach Consistently



Meaningful coaching notes
Low-friction feedback
Clear goal-setting

+30%
MORE REPS
ACHIEVE QUOTA

Amplify Winning Behaviors



Real-time recognition
Captured sales expertise
Rewards for extended team

+29%
SALES WINS

Drive Performance



Ongoing feedback
Customer evaluation
Visibility into top talent

+26%
SALES PIPELINE

[VIEW DEMO](#)



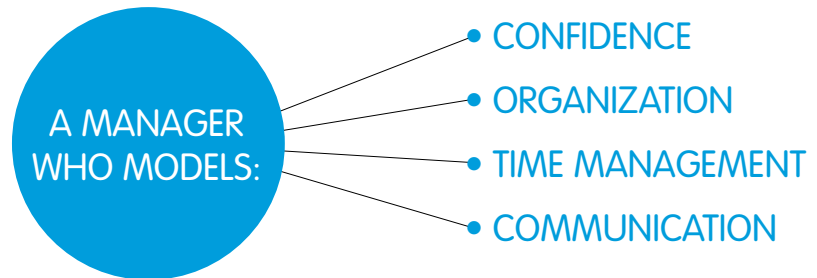
STEP ONE: BE A COACH, NOT A MANAGER

Most sales managers get promoted into the manager role because they excelled at sales. But the attributes that make you a good sales rep don't always translate to management.

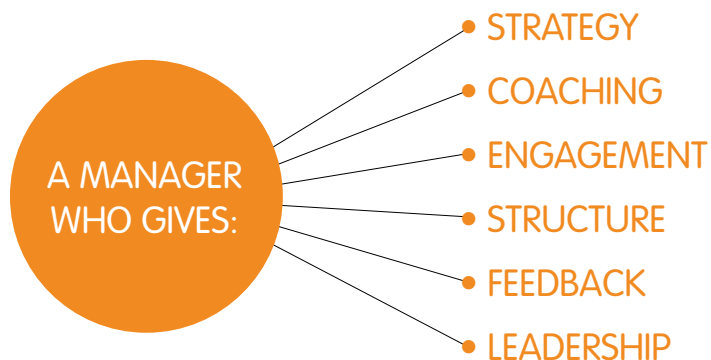
"There is a huge difference between the skills you need as a frontline rep and a manager," says Mark Roberge, the SVP of Sales and Services at HubSpot, a fast-growing Boston technology company. "It requires a complete rethinking of your role. High performance means helping your team succeed."

Coaching is a give-and-take, collaborative process. Done well, it has the power to boost the performance of your all-stars, motivate average performers to reach the next tier, and elevate lower performers. At one company with a large sales force and several hundred sales districts, the districts in which sales reps received at least ten minutes of coaching a day enjoyed 17% higher goal attainment than those receiving less than ten minutes of Leadership coaching.

WHAT MANAGERS
THINK
REPS WANT



WHAT REPS
REALLY
WANT

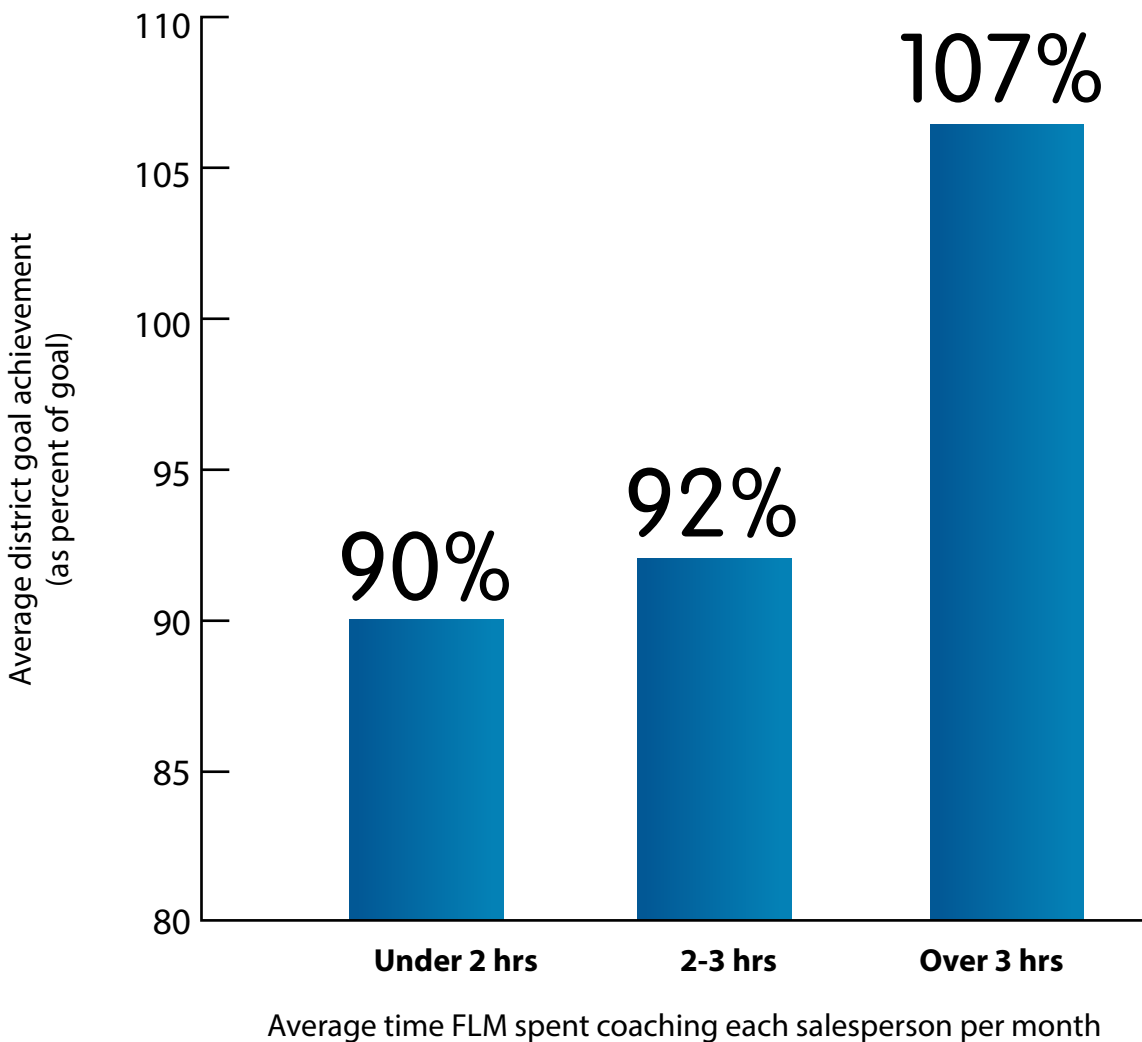


SALES COACHING DRIVES GOAL ATTAINMENT

“Evaluation doesn’t help you do your job better— coaching does”

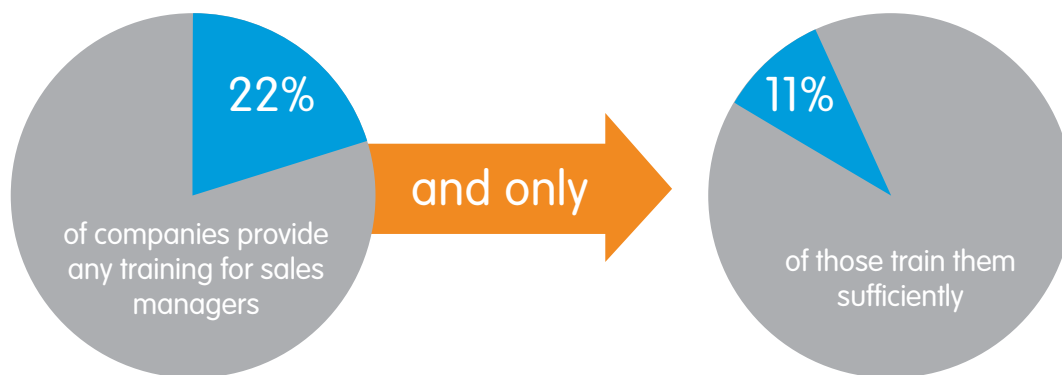
— Thomas Steenburgh, an associate professor in the marketing unit at the Darden School of Business.

Reps who received just ten minutes of sales coaching a day enjoyed 17% higher goal attainment



Source: Building a Winning Sales Management Team: The Force Behind the Sales Force (Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer, 2012)

The problem is that few companies properly train their managers to be effective coaches. According to a recent study:



Few people take on the sales manager role knowing exactly how to coach. For most, it's a matter of practice and experimentation to get it right. Here are a few common mistakes and how to avoid them.



Talking Too Much

Coaching is not an opportunity for you to show off your knowledge. While past experience may be relevant and even helpful, your focus should be on your sales rep. Let her do most of the talking. Resist the urge to dictate how she should improve, especially in the early stages. Let her find her own path, but direct her with probing questions.



Not Listening

Far too many leaders appear to be listening when they are simply waiting to speak next. Put everything out of your head when your rep is talking. Take in what he is saying and reflect on it. Don't just listen to the words, but also watch body language to understand the underlying emotions. Play back what you heard to demonstrate comprehension and empathy.



Expecting Immediate Progress

Change takes time. Of course you want your rep to improve right away, especially if his performance is suffering. Instead of telling a rep that he needs to get better at connecting with a prospect (which can seem daunting), find smaller goals he can work toward. Break it down into more manageable tasks he can practice, such as using small talk to engage the prospect.

Coaching your team members regularly is the only way to get better at it. Afterward, reflect on what worked and what didn't and adjust your approach accordingly.

STEP TWO: SET DAILY GOALS AND TRACK PROGRESS AGAINST THEM

Many sales reps want complete autonomy. Just give them a quota and let them loose. But research shows that setting more specific, short-term goals with your reps — and then holding them accountable for achieving them — is critical to improving sales performance. A 12-year study of sales reps at Fortune 500 and 1000 companies across 28 industries found that “holding others accountable” is one of the core skills consistent among top sales leaders.

When setting goals, don't just give your salespeople longterm targets such as monthly sales volume. Instead set expectations for what they need to achieve on a daily basis – both for professional and personal development. How many calls should they make each day? How many meetings? Are they developing a sense of urgency with their prospects? Are they working on their active listening skills? Are they prioritizing their daily tasks more effectively?

Use the sales cycle to break down all the tasks, activities, and actions reps need to complete every month — and hold them accountable for hitting real, measurable targets in these areas.

The best way to ensure your reps are following through is to meet with each of them regularly 1:1; outline the specific activities they needs to accomplish; and then assign a percentage of time they should dedicate to each. Remember to leave 20% of time free for unexpected demands. This will help reps better manager their time and drive toward their targets.

SECRETS OF SALES COACHING

TOP SECRET

Don't Assume

Use metrics to assess strengths and areas for improvement. To become an effective coach, you need to be armed with information. How is she performing? Where is she struggling? What skills is she missing? What approaches has she tried? Before you start coaching, gather this data by observing her in action and asking direct questions.

Set Monthly Goals

Talk with your reps about the behaviors you've observed. Focus on the “what,” not the “why.” Resist the temptation to speculate about their motivations. Instead, ask for their perspective on the issue. Set monthly goals for both professional and personal development. Whenever possible, create a challenge that pushes your reps to test a new behavior or skill and then track their progress against their goals.

Model Winning Behaviors

As a former sales rep you can demonstrate what it takes to be successful. David Donlan, a senior sales leader at HubSpot, sits with new or struggling reps and makes calls together. First, he'll have the rep watch him.

STEP THREE: MOTIVATE THE MIDDLE

When recognition and rewards are done right, they have a powerful effect on sales reps. Star performers are incentivized to stick around — and the behaviors that make them successful are celebrated publicly, encouraging colleagues to emulate them.

But even sales managers committed to motivating their employees often get it wrong. Three key insights can make all the difference when it comes to motivating your sales team:

Don't Forget About The Middle

A common mistake sales managers make is spending too much time with their superstars. Highly successful managers devote equal time to superstars, core performers, and low performers.



25%
OF SALES PEOPLE
LAGGARDS

Laggards need more guidance and prodding to make their numbers.



55%
OF SALES PEOPLE
CORE PERFORMERS

Core performers get the least attention, even though they're the group most likely to move the needle - if they're given the proper incentives



20%
OF SALES PEOPLE
STARS

Stars seem to knock down any target that stands in their way - but may stop working if a ceiling is imposed.

Then they'll alternate doing the calls. And finally, Donlan will observe as his reps make their own calls — following up with suggestions afterwards. This approach gives his reps the confidence they need to be successful.

Follow-up regularly 1:1

Check in on the progress of each sales rep about what's worked and what hasn't. Be consistent in following through so reps know you are invested. Give concrete suggestions for how your reps can improve. Be sure this is a two-way conversation and that you are getting input as well. Use openended questions such as "How do you feel about your progress?"

“Success is professional. It results from a series of small disciplines.”

— Tony Robbins

Celebrate wins publicly

Recognition doesn't just motivate the rep receiving it — it has an amplifying effect on the entire team. Be specific about why you're celebrating your rep. It will reinforce the right behavior and motivate others to emulate it.

Drive Motivation with More Than Money

Professor Steenburgh at the Darden School of Business says most incentive programs are geared toward the top band of performers, thereby encouraging managers to focus their time and energy there. But in many companies it's the middle band — usually about 60% of the sales force — that brings in the largest chunk of revenue.

As a manager, this group represents a worthwhile investment of your coaching and management time. Don't ignore them because you are too busy paying attention to top performers. And make sure you provide access to incentive programs for people in this middle tier, who usually miss out on top prizes and quotas.

63% of high performing managers spread their attention evenly across their team  **46%** of all other managers exhibited the same behavior.

Meanwhile, managers who focused exclusively on top performers, or poor performers, were far less likely to be successful

Look Beyond The Bonus

Sure, many salespeople got into the field for the money but that's not the only thing that motivates them. Remember that reps value non-monetary rewards just as much. Flexible schedules, better work/life balance, and autonomy cost nothing to the company and can make a huge impact on productivity.

Be Specific And Public

Find ways to acknowledge reps for a particular accomplishment in public, and specific about what they've achieved — and the impact on the company. Emphasizing why a rep is being recognized will motivate them — and others around them — to repeat the behaviors that made them successful.

Be Positive

Some well-meaning managers make crucial mistakes when it comes to motivation. Consider this story witnessed by Steve Martin, author of [Heavy Hitter Sales Linguistics: 101 Advanced Sales Call Strategies for Senior Salespeople](#). He worked with a VP of Sales who sent out a long list of everything his team was doing wrong and how they could perform better. His intention was to help them figure out how to work better but instead left them discouraged and insecure.

"Sales is highs and lows, ups and downs; it's a mental, emotional, and psychological job," says Martin. "You want to motivate them to succeed so when they're at the customer site, they're conveying confidence and success. If you berate them, they'll communicate the opposite."

STEP FOUR: FOCUS ON PEOPLE, NOT PROCESS

Whether you've been in the job for several years or just got the promotion, it helps to step back and think about your role. Your company may or may not have a formal job description (unfortunately many do not), and even if your role is written down, what you do day-to-day may not line up with your formal responsibilities.

Marshall Solem, the managing principal at ZS Associates, characterizes the job as having three distinct roles:



People Manager

This includes selecting, coaching and mentoring, and rewarding your team members as well as making sure they're hitting their numbers.



Customer Manager

In addition to managing people, you likely retain a responsibility for selling, and you play a key role in important calls or meetings.



Business Manager

Whether you report to the regional director or a VP, it's your job to deliver accurate forecasts and regular updates.

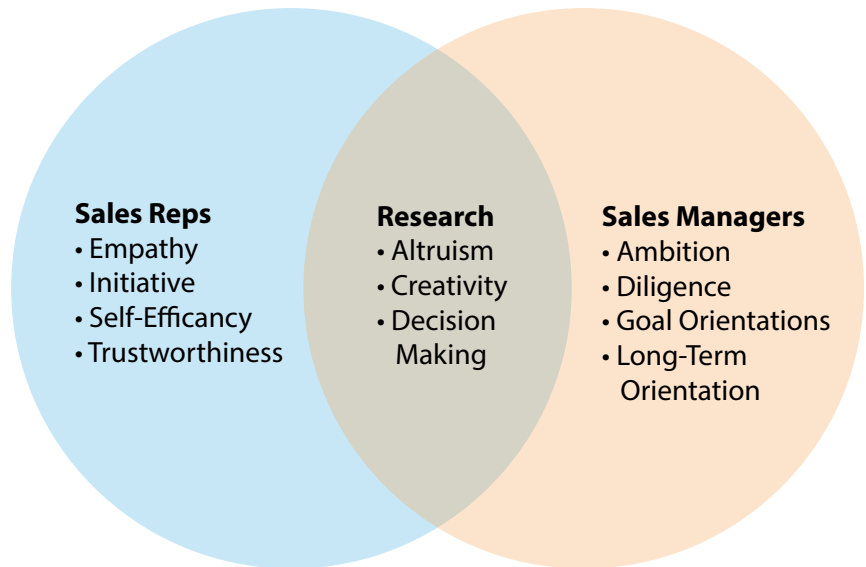
How much time you spend in each area depends on your specific job and the culture of your company. But few managers spend enough time on, or put the right kind of effort into, the first role. In fact, there is a strong tendency for sales managers to get pulled into administrative activities and away from coaching and mentoring your salespeople.

75% of sales leaders believe their front-line managers spend too much time on administration and logistics that don't add value to the business

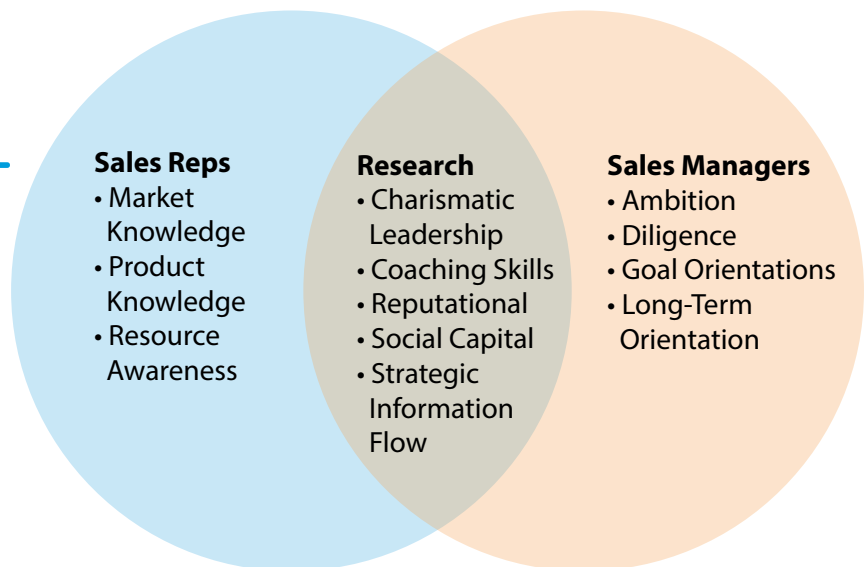
In one study, 75% of sales leaders believe their front-line managers spend too much time on administration and logistics that don't add value to the business. Sales managers who prioritize coaching over administrative duties perform 5% better than those who don't.

Based on surveys with over a thousand managers and salespeople across multiple companies, the highlighted skills correlate most with sales performance:

KEY TRAITS OF SALES MANAGERS AND REPS



KEY SKILLS THAT DRIVE SALES PERFORMANCE



Source: Michael Ahearne, University of Houston

STEP FIVE: THE BEST FEEDBACK IS SERVED FRESH

The best time to provide reps with performance feedback is immediately following a sales call or meeting. The longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes to provide meaningful, constructive feedback. When you have someone who is failing to hit targets or struggling to keep up with activity requirements, the following three steps can make a huge difference:



Diagnose

Many things may cause underperformance: lack of motivation; skill deficiency; lack of alignment with goals; personal conflicts; or family issues. Very rarely is the reason straightforward, but it is your job as a manager to understand what's going on. Ask your rep to explain his view of what's causing the performance problem. Then, ask what he thinks each of you needs to do to fix it.



Prescribe

Explain to your rep how the situation can be remedied. Ask for her input so that she is invested in the solution. Define what success looks like, set clear goals, and timelines, and make consequences clear.



Provide Support

Offer as much help as you can. This may include removing obstacles, such as competing priorities or unnecessary distractions, or providing the training your rep needs.



Know Your Superpower, But Appreciate Others

As people move up to sales manager, they often try to teach their salespeople to use the style that made them successful. "The number one thing that makes a sales manager successful is the ability to successfully communicate and apply their past experiences with each of the members of their team," says Martin. "Recognize what you're good at but don't force that approach on others."

"When I look across different salespeople the best folks don't all look the same," says Roberge at HubSpot. "I have one guy who is great at building rapport. He doesn't have great product knowledge but he can connect with any prospect. Others don't immediately connect but are great listeners when it comes to solving the customers technical problems."

David Donlan agrees. He explains that every salesperson on his team needs something different. "Some need you to micromanage because they're new and need help. Others have been in sales for 15 years and just want you to get out of the way."

Regardless of the make up of your specific team, be sure to treat each person as an individual with a unique—and valuable—style.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at the Harvard Business Review, where she specializes in management issues. Recent articles include [Making Sure Your Employees Succeed](#), [How to Keep Your Star Performers in Trying Times](#), and [How to Navigate Bonus Season](#). Previously, Amy was director of operations for renowned executive coach Marshall Goldsmith and a consultant at Katzenbach Partners, a New York strategy and organization firm. Amy is an adjunct professor at Brown University, where she received an MPA in Public Policy. She also holds a BA in Sociology from Yale University.

Endnotes

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