

Coaching Sales Teams Through Tough Times

How are you handling the economic turmoil we're all experiencing right now? Whether good or bad, I think we can all agree that fear and anxiety have driven many customers into a cost-cutting mode. Hopefully, this pent-up demand will soon move these customers forward. As sellers, we face the challenge to address these buyers' fears to continue to push forward and not hold back. Sometimes fear can be a positive factor to motivate people to make some changes for the better. As a manager, try to channel the fear factor into a motivating factor for your sales team. It starts with you first, so become a cheerleader to boost morale and confidence!

Communicate To Breakdown Barriers

Energy and enthusiasm are contagious and can influence your sales reps positively. Step it up a notch by having more open dialogue and conversation with your salespeople. When they feel they can trust you, they'll respond more openly and share problems. You then have a better opportunity to identify performance areas that may need coaching or training. If your people sense that you don't care, they will not open up, so break down the barriers and start communicating with your team.

Step up communication with your customers and key accounts as well. Problem-solving and troubleshooting on customers' issues keeps you visible even though they may not be buying. Your Sales Professionals require a different mindset to help customers overcome their economic woes and push forward. Applying pressure and trying to create the urgency won't work. When the customer sees you as a solutions provider and not merely a vendor, the partnership forms. You become a trusted advisor, demonstrating further cost savings with the customer which creates the mindset for your products and services. It also leads to greater sales by penetrating the account and becoming the preferred supplier. Communication includes having regular sales meetings with prepared agendas. Challenge your sales team with open-ended questions and keep asking, "Why?" Go for depth until they understand that the same type of questioning needs to be applied to customers, in order to surface true expectations and motives during these trying times.

Take a look at your Selling Process and how you make presentations and communicate your Value Story. Analyze what's working and what's not. Change it, if it isn't working. If it does

work, do more of it. Communicate the importance of pipeline activity and keeping focus. Salespeople have a tendency to drift, so keep track of them and guide them back when they need it. This may require more one-on-one time on your part, but if you have the relationship and provide coaching with consistency, you can expect to see improvement in the rep's performance. As you coach and communicate with your people, try to listen to understand first, then talk to be understood and you'll reach the desired action. The same holds true with customers!

Debrief Your Sales Calls!

Sales managers, you have a golden opportunity for coaching when making joint calls. Make sure your sales reps go through the disciplines of pre-call planning and preparation. Allow the rep to lead and perform his/her role as the quarterback while you stay within your defined role as the sales manager. Sometimes you've just got to let go and let 'em "fly or die." The key point here is to prepare ahead of time and stay within your defined role. As you know, team selling requires discipline and structure. Unless you're bailing out the rep, always play the role of observer while you watch and record the customer's nonverbal. This subtle observation on your part could become a deciding factor when you debrief the sales call.

Debriefing a sales call is like forecasting and budgeting. You can't have one without the other! Sales leaders, shame on you if you haven't developed the habit of reviewing sales calls. It's the best way... a nice and easy, informal way of coaching for improvement. Several of our clients use our role-play critique form as a "field coaching" form to debrief joint sales calls. It's a quick, consistent and structured approach following the Selling Process. Let the rep evaluate the call first because he/she is usually all pumped up from making the call. Fill in what was missed, share your observations, especially on nonverbal body language. Coach him/her accordingly in a positive vein. I remember some of the best times I had with my sales manager (my father) was debriefing sales calls. It was an enjoyable as well as redefining moment for me. Isn't that what coaching should be all about?

Become A Teacher First, Then A Coach

The best sales rep doesn't always become the best sales manager or coach. Coaching is an acquired skill. It takes training, practice and repetition to become good at it. There are different skill sets that are required. You must have an insightful awareness into the other person's thinking and demonstrate that you care. There are many other attributes that depict a good

coach. You have to be genuine and honest up front with your salespeople, or they won't commit.

Coaching to me is very simple. It's all about teaching and developing people to grow. Teaching and training go hand-in-hand. One of the finest coaching skills is the ability to bring your people together and teach them. People like to interact, discuss, support and learn from each other; especially now, during the unsettling times that we face. Can all sales managers become good coaches and teachers? Probably not! A sales manager should recognize his/her strengths and weaknesses and be able to ask for help or assistance if needed. Now is the time to train your salespeople and coach them through this difficult, economic period. Changes are inevitable and will only continue to occur. Teach your sales team how to catch the fish, instead of doing all the fishing for them.

One of the highlights of my career was meeting and working with Chuck Noll, former coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers. The Steelers had just won their fourth Super Bowl by beating Dallas and were at the top of their game. What impacted me the most was Chuck's persistence that he was a teacher first, and not just a coach. He shared all of his teachings and findings on team concepts with me, as well as characteristics that I apply to sales teams today. I think you'll agree his legacy continues to impact the success of the Steelers. So sales managers, try to become a teacher first, and allow your coaching skills to evolve naturally. Let me know if I can teach and coach you as well!

Good Luck & Good Selling,

Bob Butler, TSP

Bob Butler is president and CEO for Butler Learning Systems (BLS). BLS provides sales training, consulting, leadership development and service excellence...enhancing relationships and changing lives. BLS has emerged as the "sales training expert" after nearly 50 years.

Bob is truly "The Sales Professional®," celebrating over 30 years of experience in the sales trenches and as a sales trainer. He has co-authored numerous sales training programs with his father and founder of BLS, Don Butler. He is a "product of the product."

Butler Learning Systems ~ 1325 W. Dorothy Lane ~ Dayton, OH 45409

888-298-7462 ~ Fax: 866-298-5022

www.butlerlearning.com ~ info@butlerlearningsystems.com