BRAINSHARK
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11 Keys for Effective Sales Coaching

WHY SALES COACHING?

Today's data shows that sales coaching is considered the 'kale' of sales organizations: Everybody knows it's healthy, it's become trendy, but few actually put it on their plate. In a Forbes Insights study, 74% of top companies cited "coaching or mentoring" as sales managers' most important responsibility[1] – yet only a sliver of poll respondents (15%) say they have the right amount of sales coaching in place.[2]

Sales groups without a coaching program should develop a comprehensive plan that's firmly incorporated into a learning system designed to keep sales reps at the height of readiness.

Those who do have coaching should strive for a program with greater effectiveness and productivity – to deliver the type and amount of coaching that's "just right."

Here's why: **Coaching can drive significant results.**

- The combination of training and coaching led to an 88% increase in productivity in one study, 65 percentage points higher than just training alone.[3]
- The Sales Management Association found that firms that focused on coaching have 10-15% greater revenue than their competition.[4]
- Better coaching by sales managers can boost staff satisfaction. Over 60% of salespeople are more likely to leave their job if their manager is a poor coach.[5]

It's clear that the road to sales superiority is paved by a well-tuned coaching program. The following are 11 keys to getting your sales coaching strategy – and, ultimately, your sales force – more effective than ever.

Describe the amount of coaching provided at your organization:

- 77% Too Little
- 8% Too Much
- 15% Just Right
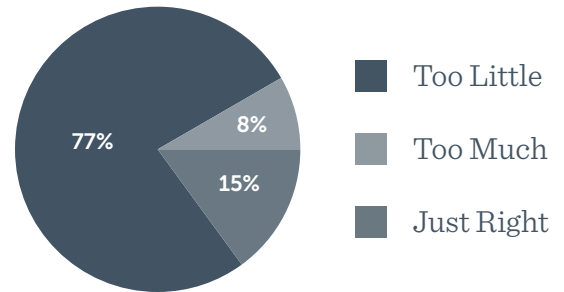
01
Begin by getting buy-in across your organization

Whether you're starting a coaching initiative or making modifications to one, you won't get far without the right people at your company nodding their heads. Especially your executive team.

"If senior leadership doesn't come to an agreement that things have to change, your whole program is going to be at risk."

-Michael Crain, CloudCoaching International

Even if you run into roadblocks, it's possible to get something started. Senior sales leaders can work coaching into sales managers' regular interactions with reps, but it's unlikely that something larger will survive.

"An individual can rise to the occasion and do it on their own," says Michael Crain, vice president of global sales & product design at CloudCoaching International. "But if the culture doesn't accept it, you are at risk."

02
Know the difference between training and coaching

Don't assume that a strong training program will naturally lead to stellar coaching – or that a superstar coaching program can replace training. Training and coaching each do something fundamentally different, and each works best when complemented by the other.

Training: Teaching someone what to do, why or how to do it, and perhaps when and where to do it

Coaching: Helping a person with that knowledge attain a higher level of quality and performance

Without coaching, you're just training reps over and over, without giving them a way to elevate certain elements of what they know to a level of mastery.

Think of it this way: a poker champion can teach you the basics of Texas Hold 'Em, that's training. But when coaching is applied, you learn the finer points of the game – when to fold, check or raise, or what to look for in opponents – and have a better shot at winning in nearly all situations.

03
Remove distance and time barriers

With very few exceptions, running a sales team means some of your people work remotely. Those that do have a desk at headquarters are often in the field, doing their job.

Scheduling one-on-one coaching sessions across a variety of time zones and locations could quickly become a nightmare for sales managers – not to mention, completely contradict the idea of streamlining a sales manager's day, so they can devote more time to purposeful coaching.

A workable coaching program must include coaching tools that can deliver recorded, on-demand coaching and feedback. This knocks down the natural obstacles of geography and time – and gets your sales team in synch.

In 2016

50%
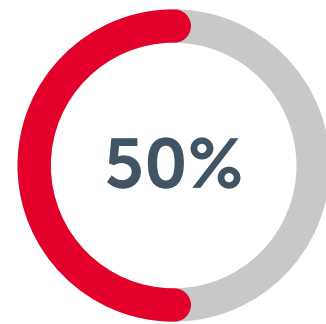
of the U.S. workforce conducts business remotely at times.

25%

works remotely on a regular basis.

04
Coach often and with purpose

How can sales managers coach when their schedules are already overstuffed? It's not easy, but with organizational buy-in (see key #1) and a good plan, regular coaching can become part of your process.

To carve out more time, try scheduling fewer meetings for sales managers, using sales and coaching tools for greater efficiency, and consider improved performance a key responsibility of any sales manager's job.

Question: What are the highest-impact obstacles to coaching salespeople?

1. Managers are too busy.

2. Managers don't know how.

3. Managers are not held accountable.

Source: Sales Management Association

"Nothing replaces strategic coaching," explains Mike Kunkle, senior director of sales enablement at Brainshark. "That's where you figure out how you can get the greatest performance lift in return on your coaching efforts. Then, go coach purposefully."

Here's how: Stick to a particular aspect of the sales process that needs improving – it might be a new value pitch or specific messaging point. Create an activity around that one point, with a goal to be achieved. Work on it with reps, using the tools you have and a process for review and measurement.
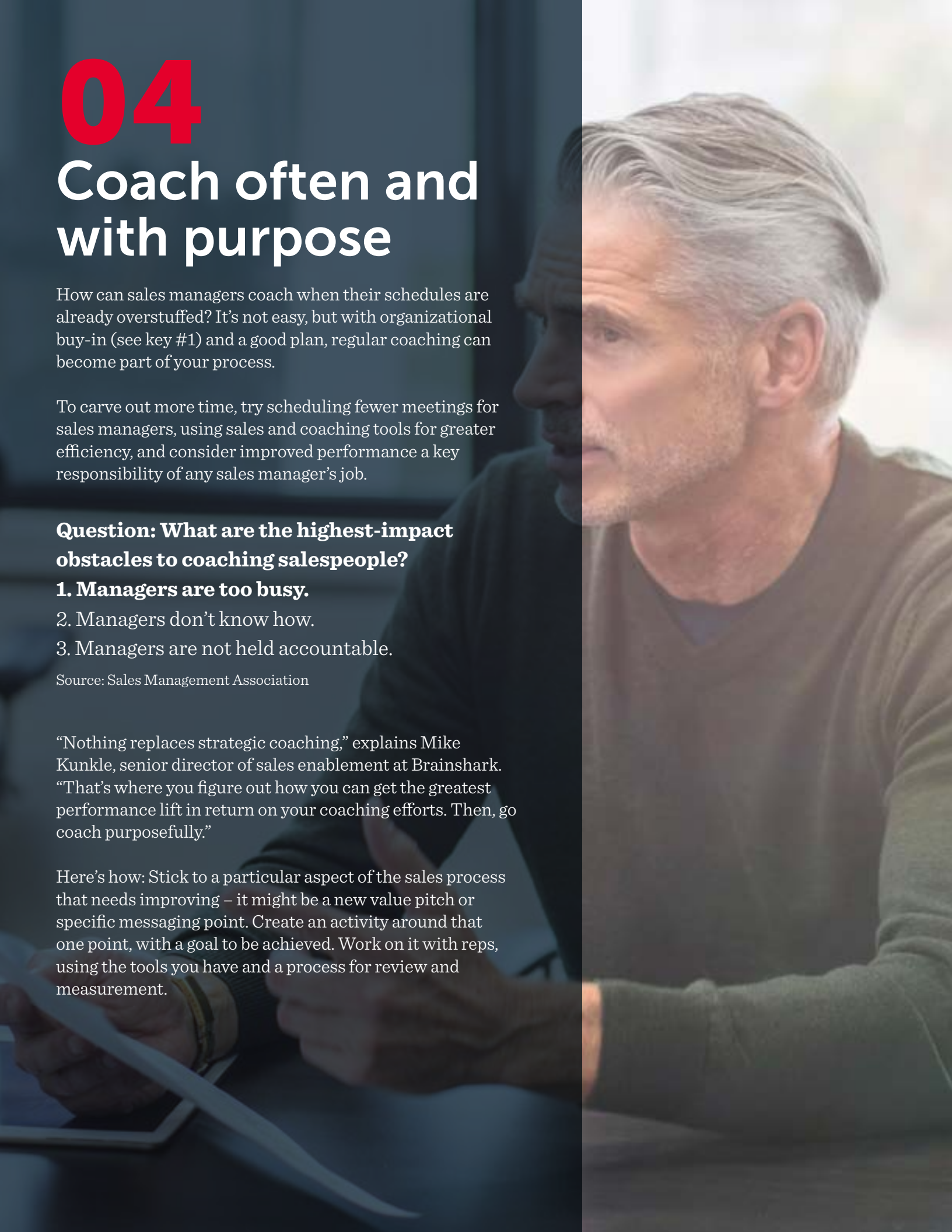
05
Have a unified way to review and rate performance

Performance data is already at the core of selling – you can't track reps' progress without basic measurements like quarterly quotas or new hires' time to first sale.

Similarly, coaching must have points of achievement, with a rubric that's roughly the same for everyone, regardless of skill level and experience.

Just as a rookie salesperson needs to be judged on message accuracy, pacing, and energy, so does the most experienced rep. The rating system for each should be the same, whether it's based on 1-5, 1-10, or another typical range.

The difference is in the nuance and specificity of the sales manager's review and feedback. For instance, a manager may give a new rep four out of five stars for message accuracy; the veteran rep, working with more complex products or clients, may receive the same score – but it's relative to his or her experience. It's up to each coach to properly add context to those scores so the review is clear, and to draw up a comprehensive guideline for further improvement, as well.
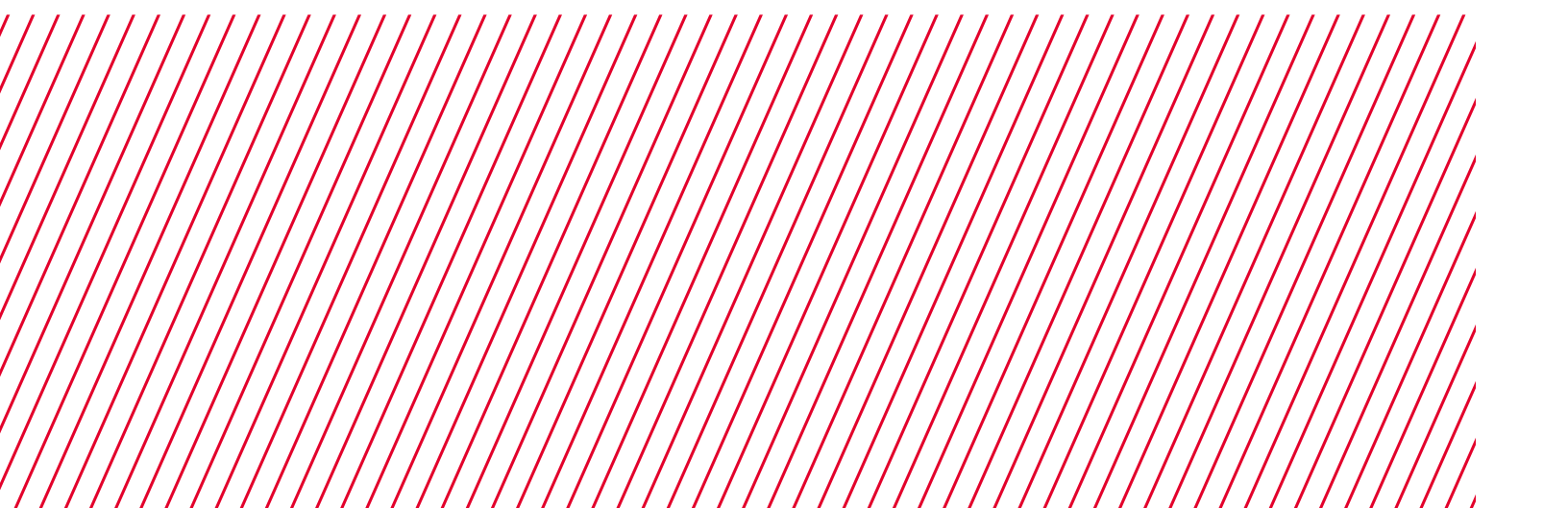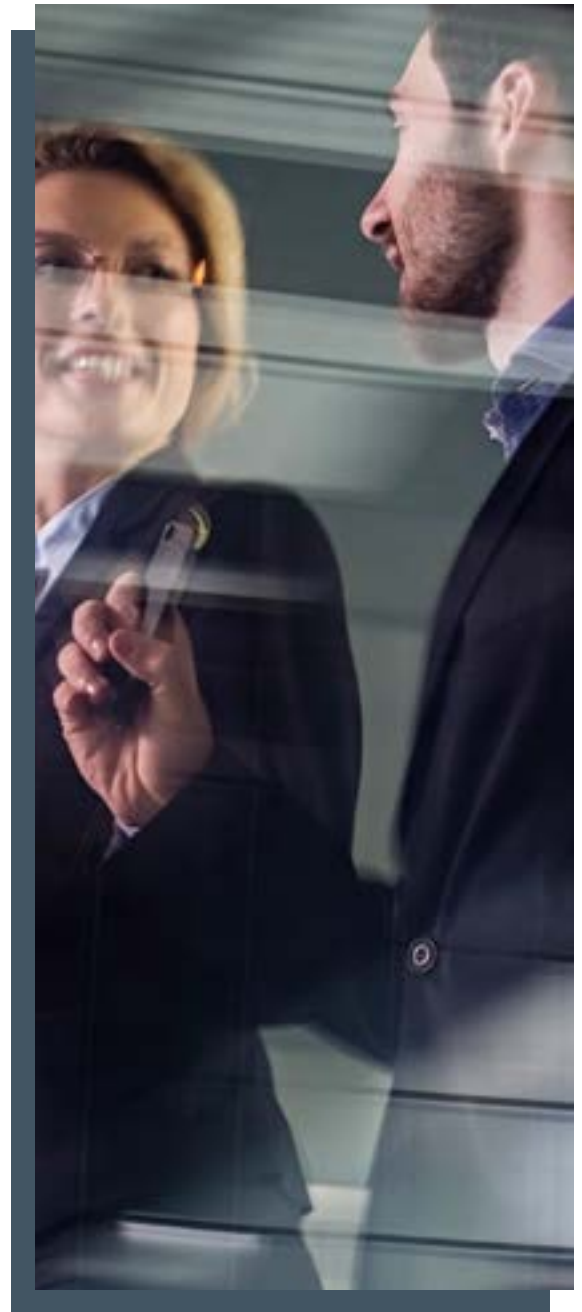
06
Don't get addicted to saving the day

One of the most important facets of sales coaching – of any coaching, really – is empowering the learner to make mistakes and figure out their own ways to improve. Sure, it's faster to tell someone how to solve a problem, but self-discovery has farther-reaching performance benefits. You know, give a man a fish...

This requires more listening and reacting by the coach. A sales manager's natural tendency is to coach to their own style, which makes sense when you consider 71% of all sales managers are promoted from sales rep roles. But it's critical for coaches to understand each rep's style of learning and where they are in their development.

"Coaches need to help reps shape their ability to reflect on their own performance. The remedy to fix a problem comes a lot easier when they're taking ownership."

– Kevin Starner, vice president of sales enablement, Iron Mountain

Coaching a 'C' performer should be handled differently than coaching a 'B' performer; the first person is looking to move beyond "average," the second could be headed for greatness and may have stronger motivation to get there. Regardless, each sales rep should be encouraged to find his or her way.

07
Don't just give direction

Key #6 warns against solving problems for the sales rep. Along those same lines, sales managers shouldn't spend coaching sessions telling a rep how it's done – it's far more effective to have a coaching conversation in which the process is a two-way exchange of ideas.

This encourages reps to sharpen skills through finer reflection and analysis, an activity that's at the very core of coaching. If it were just about learning something new from an expert, no one would need more than one training session.

Through this exchange, reps gain greater confidence by being accountable for their own improvement. What if a rep isn't inclined to help initiate his own path to progress? That may provide a helpful signal to the sales manager: perhaps this isn't the right person for the job.

08
Avoid the "one and done"

No coaching program can be effective if it isn't just that – a program. Delivering feedback on an irregular basis (or not at all) prevents your sales force from building on their knowledge and crafting superior sales skills. It's wasted potential.

> **"We have to get out of the business of training people and walking away, and expecting they're going to do something differently."**
>
> – Mike Kunkle, senior director of sales enablement, Brainshark

Brainshark's Mike Kunkle, recognized for his extensive knowledge of training and coaching methodologies, recommends implementing an Effective Learning System, through which knowledge is sustained with testing and repetition.

"People don't naturally take what they've learned and just apply it to their job," says Kunkle. "You need a plan for transfer of that information and application, so that it works in real-world settings. Then, the learning curve doesn't drop off so quickly because knowledge is reinforced."

In a learning model of Train-Sustain-Coach, sales reps go through exercises at the "Sustain" stage to retain important information, and then transfer it for use in an actual situation. At the "Coach" stage, they'll take on activities that promote practice, repetition and feedback (video is an excellent tool here) so they can be coached to mastery.

09
Prioritize peer performance and collaboration

Question: When a 'B'-level salesperson wants to become an 'A' performer, what's a good way to start?

Answer: Watch what 'A' players do and, even better, solicit feedback from them.

Peer collaboration is an important cog of any well-oiled coaching program, and when sales reps record presentations or pitches on video, your entire team has the opportunity to learn from the winners.

How does that quota-crusher present a particular value prop? What words or gestures does a perpetual 'A' player use when transitioning the conversation to talk about products? Peer collaboration helps reps learn from the best, and gives sales managers something specific they can refer to and discuss during the two-way exchange of ideas (see key #6).

Top performers can become effective coaches themselves, reviewing a struggling team member's performance to see where they're having trouble and offering detailed advice. This shared effort toward improvement helps perpetuate a "culture of coaching" for the organization. And when a recommendation to "try it this way" comes from a leading salesperson rather than a sales manager, it may have much greater impact, depending on the rep.

10
Coach the coaches

A sales manager already has what Brainshark's Mike Kunkle calls "one of the toughest jobs in corporate America today." Leaving these leaders in the lurch when it comes to their own engagement is one big and costly mistake.

Question: What are the most important sales manager development topics?
1. Sales coaching
2. Assessing salesperson performance
3. Company offerings

Source: Sales Management Association

A 2016 Sales Management Association study shows that up to 41% of firms don't specifically support sales manager development efforts. But they should. Those companies that develop their sales managers improved on their sales objectives by as much as 19%.

Where does "sales coaching" come into play? Of the myriad competencies a sales manager needs, sales coaching was cited as the most important development topic. And firms whose managers are well-trained in assessing a salesperson's performance enjoy a 16% improved sales achievement over peer firms.
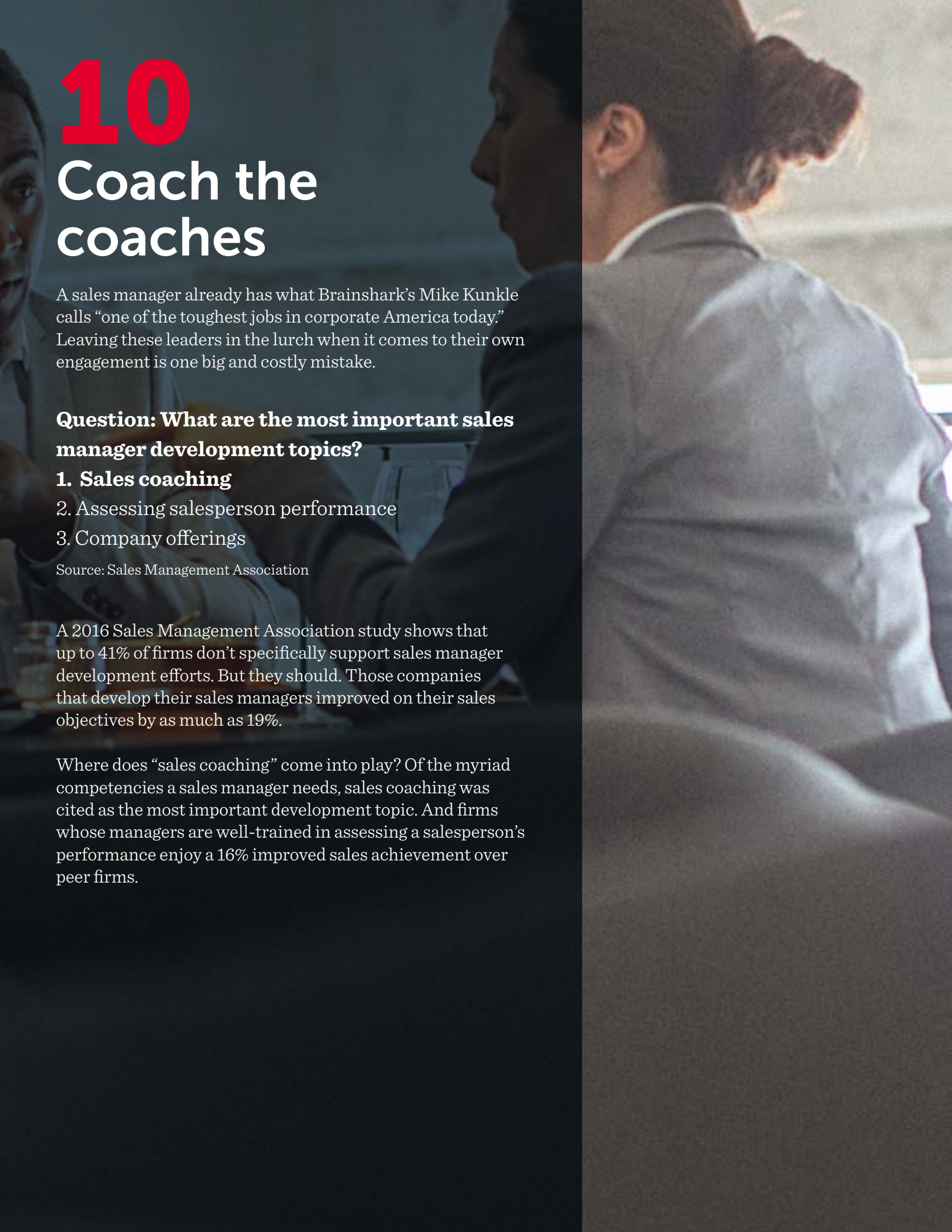
11
Rely on technology — especially video

There's no question that, without technology, many of these coaching keys could not be executed properly. Video and other coaching tools empower a sales team to implement a program that has all the necessary characteristics for learning success: immediacy, accessibility, flexibility and a method to practice, review, receive feedback and practice some more.

"Video is a great way to have a rep spend time preparing their best effort," says Iron Mountain's Kevin Starner. "With video, you get a lot of practice in that role." Starner foresees a future where the recorded "one-way" presentation gives way to more a two-way coaching conversation to "see the situational fluency that a rep might have."

Brainshark's Mike Kunkle agrees: "Recording on video encourages practice in almost a virtual role-play situation. It's a great step in the learning process, allowing people to practice in a safe environment before they stub their toe in front of a client."

Finally, Kunkle notes that the use of video creates an ongoing archive of the best sales rep performances. "It's an instant, relevant real-world library we can share amongst ourselves, but also with new reps who come on. This is far more than just a piece of paper... this is instant access to what great looks like."

Why practice your sales delivery?

91% of professionals admit to daydreaming during presentations.

Source: TrainingMag

Endnotes

[1] Forbes Insights, The Power of Enablement: Bridging the Sales Productivity Gap, 2015.

[2] Sales Management Association, Webinar: Enabling Better Sales Coaching, 2016.

[3] Center for Management and Organization Effectiveness

[4] Sales Management Association / Forum Group

[5] Zenger Folkman: How Developing a Coaching Culture Pays Off