The Emerging Role of the Field Sales Coach

Managers of major-league baseball teams are usually former players who have already spent years helping their younger counterparts as a mentor and coach at both the minor and major league levels. Their combination of knowledge and experience positions them to provide sound guidance to their players and plan strategies to win games and hopefully make a run for the pennant.

In b-to-b organizations, sales enablement functions are tasked with ensuring the long-term success of sales leaders as well as individual reps. To develop strong sales managers, sales enablement should apply competency development strategies designed to transition successful field reps into effective managers. In this brief, we describe best practices for creating a rotational field sales coach role to improve the productivity of the sales team while developing potential sales managers.

The Benefits of Coaching

The field sales coach is a transitional role that helps successful field sales reps develop into effective managers by coaching their fellow reps. This role delivers value to the sales organization in the following ways:

• Reinforces learning through practice and monitored execution. When learning a new skill or knowledge, people tend to forget almost everything within 30 days unless the new competency is regularly reinforced or used. The sales coach role enhances the value of learning programs by helping reps practice and reinforce what they have learned. Sales coaches demonstrate and monitor execution during ride-along sales calls or role-play scenarios, helping reps to master what they have learned.

• Helps successful reps transition into leaders. There is a difference between what motivates reps and what motivates leaders. While everyone wants to succeed, reps tend to focus on their own successes, whereas leaders monitor team-level or organizational accomplishments. A rotational coaching role provides a smooth transition from the high-risk/high-reward environment of individual rep contributions to the broader perspective of sales management. Traditional rep-into-manager promotions can turn a colleague into a boss overnight, which can lead to negative social and political consequences. The rotation of the coach role allows for a more gradual transition from a peer relationship to a manager-to-rep structure among former colleagues. This ease of transition is especially relevant in small and
medium-size organizations, where promoted managers are highly likely to manage former colleagues.

- **Builds leadership bench strength.** While hiring external candidates for sales leadership positions can provide fresh perspectives and fill in any missing competencies, there is intrinsic value in developing and promoting individuals who have experience selling for the organization. Product, customer, and market familiarity bring a level of trust and consistency that reps respect and appreciate, and prevent awkward situations where they must train a new boss who is unfamiliar with the organization and its offerings.

- **Creates stronger interlock between sales and other functions.** As field sales coaches share their internal expertise and connections with less tenured reps, they have the opportunity to forge stronger connections between the sales ranks and marketing, customer service, and other internal departments. This interlock can promote sales rep engagement with enablement programs, as reps appreciate guidance from someone who has experience in the field. When field coaches are empowered to advocate for reps’ needs while championing corporate strategies, divisive attitudes (e.g. headquarters vs. field) can be minimized. Because of their frontline perspective, coaches also can provide valuable feedback to company leadership to help identify the root causes of sales issues (e.g. lack of engagement, underperformance in specific areas).

**Structuring the Role**

While the field coach role is not new, approaching it as a rotational development role for high-potential sales reps adds a new dimension. Apply the following considerations to ensure the position is properly structured:

- **Putting the “field” in field coach.** Because the individuals in this role are likely to someday manage the reps they assist, they need to spend at least 50 percent of their time coaching and assessing reps in the field. Ideally, the coach rotates among the regions, districts, or product lines that will eventually fall under his or her management purview—though assisting any rep or territory can yield benefits for the coach and the coached.

- **Reporting structure.** Having the field sales coach role report to the sales enablement function allows the organization to provide in-depth initial and ongoing development support, as well as a more objective view of each coach’s readiness for future promotion. Typically, this role lasts for 18 to 24 months and can be coordinated with wider leadership development and mentoring programs. Include a manager mentor from the first-line manager ranks—or one level above—to complement the reporting structure and provide additional field-based perspective.

- **Bridging the compensation gap.** High performers are the best candidates for field coach roles; however, because they have grown accustomed to earning target incentives, the organization must address their compensation expectations. Implement a base pay plan that keeps coaches within 10 percent of the average of their last two to three years’ total earnings. This structure will include a much higher base salary than what the coach earned as a rep, along with a smaller variable component. It provides less upside but eliminates the uncertainty associated with highly variable pay. Any variable or short-term incentive components should align with corporate standards, though attaching some measure of compensation to the success of the reps being coached has netted positive results for some organizations. Also take into account the value of alternative forms of “compensation” (e.g. being recognized as a top performer, earning the distinction of being groomed for leadership, participating in executive-level conversations that affect the future of sales).

**Core Responsibilities**

The field coach typically has multiple primary areas of focus: directly coaching reps in simulated and live environments, contributing to learning programs by serving as a field voice for content and executing program components, and providing answers and insights to reps while helping them navigate the organization. Consider the following specific responsibilities:

- **Coaching new reps.** Coaching new hires as they transition from their onboarding program into client-facing interactions is a common responsibility for the field coach. The coach serves as an in-field support resource, provides feedback and certifies new reps for independent interactions with buyers.

- **Coaching existing reps.** Field coaches also can play a critical role in reinforcing key behaviors for struggling reps or those who require recertification. In addition, while
every conversation with buyers must be personalized, sales organizations cannot scale and repeat success without setting standards for messaging, branding and pricing. Field sales coaches can champion and reinforce these standards across multiple sellers and territories in support of first-line sales managers.

- **Supporting new skills and knowledge.** The field coach should support initiative-based learning (e.g. introductions of new products, messaging, techniques or sales methodologies). In this capacity, he or she serves as a field evangelist and subject matter expert (SME).

- **Facilitating two-way communication and feedback.** The coach provides an authentic, experienced voice at the business unit or enterprise level, and often serves formally or informally as a second-level answer desk contact. Coaches are leveraged as SMEs, sounding boards and secondary management overlays for the field, as well as advocates for reps’ needs to management.

- **System adoption.** Adoption of sales technology deployments vary widely, and the popularity (or rejection) of a platform can spread rapidly among reps once the technology is rolled out by corporate functions into the field. The field coach can fulfill a vital enablement function by rallying reps around the benefits of new tools, providing in-field certification and ultimately helping individual contributors leverage the investment to get more work done, more effectively.

**Required Competencies and Behaviors**
The field sales coach role requires the following skills, knowledge and behaviors:

- **Required skills.** A successful coach must have mastered all the skills needed to be a successful b-to-b sales professional. He or she must have demonstrated success in representing the company’s offerings to external buyers and effectively building customer relationships that meet or exceed quota expectations. Core skills include communications, relationship management and pipeline management.

- **Required knowledge.** In addition to strong knowledge of the organization’s products, services, buyers and markets, each field coach should have deep insight into how the organization functions. Sales reps succeed not only by closing plenty of deals, but also by understanding how to navigate among business units and functions, and through internal networking – especially in medium-size and large organizations. Field sales coaches must share this knowledge to lift the situational awareness of the reps they are coaching.

- **Required behaviors.** Given that one purpose of the field sales coach role is to transition a high-performer into a strong sales leader, newly promoted coaches may not immediately possess the maturity and big-picture thinking of a seasoned sales executive. Still, the right behavioral traits should be present, including a willingness to support the company’s position on key issues, a documented history of interest in helping others succeed, and highly professional behavior internally and in front of customers.

**The Sirius Decision**
High potential doesn't always turn into high performance. Plenty of outstanding reps fail to succeed as managers, while others are consistent individual producers but earn even more distinction as coaches and managers through a relentless commitment to helping others do their best. Implementing a field sales coaching program creates a dual opportunity for the organization: rewarding successful reps with a career trajectory that helps them contribute more deeply to company success, while developing and validating the capabilities of these individuals before they take on higher-risk roles as sales leaders.