

THE SCHNEIDER REPORT

Volume 7
Mar-31-2010

Coaching to Increase Sales

People do what they do because of what happens to them when they do it. This applies to your sales force, as it does to anyone, anywhere within your organization. The challenge becomes reinforcing the positive results you want to see and minimizing those activities that are not contributing to your bottom line. A defined, consistent coaching routine is the best way to get the most from your people, and deliver the best results for your firm.

Many view these as “soft skills” which are first to be eliminated, reduced, or forgotten during lean times. A recent Wall Street Journal article Rewards for Extra Work Come Cheap in Lean Times (January 4, 2010) extolled the virtues of non-monetary incentives. But these very tools and skills can enhance performance during good and challenging times alike, and should become a core discipline in any organization that strives to be a top performer, or for many in today’s environment, a survivor.

Here are eight areas that define a successful coaching routine:

1. Coaching to a Preferred Behavior Model

Defining “how” you want your people to sell is as important as “what” you want them to sell. Defining the process, how they go about engaging customers/members, what they say and how the conversation should flow, all become critical points of contact and part of your “Preferred Selling Behaviors.” Once defined, these all become coachable skills that people can be held accountable to. A common pitfall for organizations has been that they don’t define these critical behaviors or process and leave their sales people to fend for themselves, only recognizing end results (volume). A focus only on results leads to product dumping conversations by employees and “buyer’s remorse” on the part of customers/members, both with long term adverse affects. Defining your Preferred Behavior Model or what you will coach to becomes your first step.

2. Informal Coaching

Informal coaching is simply observing behavior and letting people know what was done right, or what they should do differently for better results. This needs to be done and explained very specifically. You want people to be able to replicate the positive behavior (or stop the corrective) and the only way they can do that is to know exactly what they have done so they can do more of that or work to correct it. In essence telling someone they have done a good job is not specific enough; you need to explain exactly what was good about the interaction or performance.

THE SCHNEIDER REPORT

Informal coaching should be done as close to the event as possible so people clearly can reflect on what took place, both positive and constructive. Also, as much as possible, positive coaching should be done publicly. You will want the positive results to affect as many employees as possible, not just the individual involved. Constructive feedback should always be one-on-one.

When it comes to coaching feedback, more is better, but guard against it becoming gratuitous in nature. Make sure it is sincere. The ratio of positive vs. constructive commentary should be at least 3 to 1. Top performing organizations operate at a 3 to 1 ratio, most organizations however do not move past 1 to 1.

3. Formalized Coaching

Formalized coaching is taking more time to observe an employee and providing broader comprehensive feedback. This will start with a scheduled observation time where an employee will be observed interacting with one or more customers/members. An assessment of their demonstrated skills and areas of improvement, as defined by your preferred way of selling, is completed in writing. This assessment is then reviewed with the employee with an eye towards reinforcing what they did right and one or two area(s) to improve. Over time, this process builds the selling skills you are looking for and records a consistent and objective assessment of selling interactions.

Formalized coaching can and should also be used to review goals and results comparisons, prospecting pipelines, the effectiveness of strategies and tactics employed. All of these covered in a formal, scheduled meeting, with preplanning on the part of the manager and a follow-up plan for the employee and manager to execute.

Formalized coaching is more time consuming, but is more impactful in providing skill building, behavior, and goal oriented feedback. Sales skill building, over time, will look much like an inverted pyramid, many skills building on a solid base.

4. Self Coaching

Getting employees to think for themselves is usually an untapped coaching opportunity. The ability (through questions and encouragement) to move people to think on their feet and adjust their approach based on results is self coaching.

Asking people questions vs. providing direct feedback, asking for an employee's assessment of an interaction prior to providing guidance, will move them towards self coaching and self assessment. This over time will lead people to think through and assess their performance via each interaction from a behavioral and skills building standpoint.

THE SCHNEIDER REPORT

Providing periodic results updates vs. goal is another way to reinforce self assessment and encourage performance based reflection. Simply by documenting progress to goal on a regular basis (preferable weekly), people will make adjustments to their routines and interactions to spur results. This works however, only if people are being held accountable for results.

5. Peer Coaching

Peer coaching can be a very powerful motivator with clear results, provided it is pursued correctly. Creating and encouraging an atmosphere of support among two or more employees providing feedback and guidance on sales interactions will generate positive results and behavior change. This also has a side benefit of developing a team atmosphere.

Too often, I have seen the most common pitfall of peer coaching, which is assigning one of your top performers to work with a low performer which can impact production. In essence, you are saying to your top performer “congratulations, you have done a very nice job so I am going to give you an anchor to work with which will impede your performance.” Assigning a person to work with a top performer (observe) for a finite amount of time (an afternoon) is perfectly appropriate. Just make sure it is for a limited time and doesn’t impact the contribution your top performer is making in volume.

If you decide to use a top performer for peer coaching you will want to make sure that they are consciously competent. In many instances your top performers will be naturals at what they do and will not be able to explain the reasons for their success to others. If this is the case, then the top performer is not likely to make a good coach.

6. Value of Follow-Through

All too often companies will view a new training program, whether sales or operational, as a panacea that will solve all of the ailments afflicting the firm. Organizations will initiate new training and process but will neglect what happens after the classroom. In order for people to continue to try new skills, to engage in new approaches, they need feedback as to results. They need to know they are doing things right, to be coached.

THE SCHNEIDER REPORT

Once trained, if employees are not coached and the new processes are not reinforced, within two weeks 90% of what was learned will be gone. It becomes paramount then to have an effective plan for post training reinforcement of the skills trained. This means managers in the field, coaching, performing observations, encouraging positive behavior change and results (feedback). In short, providing the leadership that will sustain the program for the long term. Our coaching processes and sales management techniques are all designed to sustain your culture change initiative for the long term.

Developing recognition programs by person, branch, and department is a critical part of your sales process as well. In many cases it will determine the success or failure of your initiative. Sometimes all it has to be is a quick email of recognition or a note, often coming from a senior officer or CEO congratulating someone for a job well done. You would be amazed how often I see employees that have printed an email or held onto a hand written card, many more than a year old, that recognized their contribution. The impact of this encouragement is enormous and the time investment small.

7. Coaching to a Plan

Coaches are usually more effective if they have a plan. Developing and reviewing a plan periodically makes us think and act proactively, generating better results than if we had no plan at all. The same principles apply with your sales process. Have a quarterly plan listing your goals, what strategies and tactics you plan to employ to attain your goals, what three skills you will be working to develop, one skill at a time for thirty days to make it a habit. This along with your supervisors supporting employees with coaching and recognition during the plan period will enhance results. By developing a 90 day plan and executing to the plan, you will experience a lift in your results and an improvement in your sales skill building.

8. Consistency Counts

Coaching is a core competency of top performing organizations. Much like exercising, to get results in selling and a lift in production, consistency counts. Consistent execution of a defined coaching process, celebrating successes and recognizing results, will give you a sustainable competitive advantage in your marketplace. And much like exercising, when we are budget and time crunched these soft skills are the first to be overlooked, just when we need them most.

About the Author

Stephen Wallace is the Director of Field Consulting for Schneider Sales Management, LLC, and has been with the company for three years. Stephen received his B.S. in Business Administration from Husson College, 1986 and his MBA from the University of New Hampshire, 1997.

