


To get ahead in your career, it's vital to build an effective relationship with your boss. Steve Hoyle explains how salespeople should go about it

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR MANAGER



It is very apparent when talking with salespeople that some actively manage the relationship with their manager, while others – probably the majority – have a huge blind spot, and cannot fathom why they do not get the best deals, territories, accounts, pay rise or kudos.

Two recent incidents illustrate the extent to which managing their manager is a key factor in the success, or otherwise, of most salespeople.

I was involved in a business planning session where a group of about a dozen successful senior sales managers were putting the finishing touches to the annual sales plan. We started discussing actual salespeople because, although a few people might get promoted, it was evident that the company would have to 'let a few people go' and restrict pay rises.

As is often the case, sales managers were putting the case for their particular salespeople, as well as using very subjective arguments such as, "Yes, but he had an easy target," and, "She may have missed her numbers last year, but she was desperately unlucky with that big contract at XYZ, which was really outside her control," or "I know he was your biggest hitter, but the boss was not impressed when they went out together."

In a totally separate incident with another company, I was coaching a group of mid-ranking salespeople who were just about to have a new sales director (their boss's boss) introduced to them. I asked each of them how far they had got in planning for this first meeting, and was amazed to find that fewer than half of them had made any plans whatsoever.

Individually, these two incidents are interesting, but together they nicely illustrate the issue of salespeople managing their manager – or not, as is often the case. This appears to be another incidence of 'cobbler's shoes' syndrome. Competent salespeople are generally very good at managing relationships and manipulating situations so that they are highly regarded. But for some reason, this inherent ability is often not in evidence internally, and in particular when managing their own manager. ➤

It is obvious when listening to any group of sales managers discussing their people that perceptions are at least as important as raw data. In sales, we are relatively lucky in that our performance can be measured with a reasonable degree of accuracy, and our order or revenue figures against target should, over a period of time, reflect our skill and hard work. But perceptions are all-important, and even with clear factual data, sales managers will draw up images of their people based on very subjective criteria, such as their 'easy' target or 'difficult' customer base/territory.

You have to have some sympathy for sales managers. In the majority of cases they were successful sales executives suddenly thrust into a completely new role, with little or no training, a lot of responsibility and little time from their boss. At the same time, other managers, suppliers and customers demand attention, and they have a group of normally very assertive salespeople to manage. It is a difficult job, and if they are to be

MANAGING A NEW MANAGER

Recently-appointed managers present a particular challenge for salespeople to manage, but represent a great opportunity to develop a relationship that positions the salesperson very beneficially.

The vast majority of new sales managers spend their first six months learning how to complete various new, unfamiliar tasks and worrying about their management style. Should they be authoritarian or liberal? Should they be 'one of the team' or do they need to keep some distance? Do they encourage debate or lead with their own ideas? It is a very difficult time, and one that the intelligent salesperson can exploit for mutual benefit.

In these circumstances, salespeople should be very supportive, expect unpredictable behaviour and for a few mistakes to be made. They should aim mostly to be a trusted 'friend' who can be relied on to give high quality and constructive feedback, rather than creating problems or demanding too much. Attaining the position of 'trusted confidant' will instantly help the salesperson and the manager, as well as laying firm foundations for the future.

successful then they need to be managed effectively. Mostly, that means being managed by the people with whom they have most contact – their sales team.

Over the last three years I have been conducting workshops with sales teams, where we have been placing increased emphasis on how to manage your manager. The key points that have emerged from this work are as follows.

Treat them with respect

They deserve it, or if they don't deserve it, they believe that they do.

Avoid surprises

Unexpected news, such as late changes to the forecast, is a major problem for sales managers. Not only will it disrupt a busy schedule, it will create big issues as they try to explain it to their boss, potentially losing the trust and confidence that they and their team are 'on top of the business'. The best salespeople, according to many managers, are those that make sure they set correct expectations – both with customers and internally. (Incidentally, all surprises are unwelcome for a manager, but unexpected good news clearly creates fewer problems than bad news.)

Be open and honest

It is a waste of everyone's time otherwise. You may be able to 'pull the wool over their eyes' for a short period, but eventually you will get found out, destroying all trust that you have built up.

Don't treat them as stupid

Like all of us they will make silly decisions occasionally, but there is at least some ability in them, otherwise they would not have got the job.

Delegate upwards effectively

Make sure that they are very clear about what you have asked them to do, by when and that they have actually accepted the delegated task.

You can take out one of two insurance policies – 'do and tell', where they are going to do something and then tell you they have done it, or 'ask and do', where they will prepare the ground but check with you before finally taking action.

'The best salespeople are those that make sure they set correct expectations'

Give them feedback

Without feedback everyone will stop doing things for you. Sales managers need feedback just like everyone else. Give them praise when they do something good for you (which is often particularly welcome as they don't get much). Give them constructive negative feedback when they are not helping you. This is best done in a non-confrontational way, normally by explaining the consequences of actions (or lack of actions).

Understand their measures and challenges

In a recent survey that we carried out, less than 30% of salespeople really understood how their manager was measured and how they were remunerated. Yet in discussion with sales managers themselves, the vast majority have no issue with sharing this with their salespeople. Similarly, it is a rarity when a salesperson asks their boss, "What are the major challenges that you face in reaching your goals?" – although managers would be horrified if this was not being asked of all potential customers.

Understand what motivates them

Just like you and your customers, different things motivate sales managers, and you should plan your discussions, particularly feedback, around these areas. Typical motivators include the need for money, power, recognition, friendship, challenge, security – or even an easy life.

Communicate

Problems between managers and salespeople often stem from poor communication. To manage your manager effectively, you must be very clear with them about what is expected from both of you and what

you can expect from them, what are your bounds of freedom and when you should refer back to them. Ideally, your manager will make this communication happen, but it is also in your own best interests.

If they ask you to do something, ensure you do it

Within reason. Your manager knows that you want to do everything to make yourself successful, and that is what they want. They will have spent inordinate amounts of time figuring out who should be handling which accounts and being responsible for different aspects of the business. The last thing that they want is for you to either refuse or kick up a fuss. You will not make any friends in management if you are the one to destroy their carefully made and intricate plans.

Keep on top of the housekeeping

Sales managers have many people trying to take time and attention out of their day, and the last thing they want is someone from finance, admin or their boss complaining that reports haven't been completed, expenses haven't been filled in correctly or databases haven't been updated. These things are a distraction and a frustration, which divert everyone from the real selling task. But they have to be done and managers cannot understand why people don't just do them properly and on time.

Be united

Managers expect loyalty, especially in public. It may be that there are serious issues that need addressing, but sales managers want to have these debates

in private and not in public – especially in front of their boss or peers at meetings or sales conferences. A golden rule for sales managers is 'praise in public, punish in private' – a similar rule for salespeople would be 'defend in public, debate in private'.

Come up with ideas that make them, and you, look good

Managers often find it difficult to make their mark personally – they are really judged on enabling salespeople to be successful. So anything that helps them to shine among their peers and with senior management is going to be helpful. Clearly, good ideas and initiatives should help you to succeed, and have your name attached to them, but sharing the glory with your manager not only helps you build up the relationship, it also gives your project a better chance of success.

Show maturity

If you act like a spoiled child, then don't be surprised if your manager starts acting like an authoritative parent. They can't ground you, but they can make your life very difficult.

Many of these points are illustrated by the true case of a very successful new business salesperson with a global high-tech manufacturing company. She had been a good performer for a number of years before deciding to change her approach slightly, and manage internal relationships with the same

planning and rigour that she had been using solely with customers.

She researched her own organisation to understand the pressures on the minds of senior management, and then how these challenges worked their way down into pressures on sales managers. She then combined this context with a short campaign to get to know her own manager a lot better – finding out more about his background, preferences, measures and issues. She realised that most of the pressure on him came from his boss and other management colleagues. Within a very short time she was able to put all of her own requests into the context

of her manager's challenges – with dramatic results. She immediately benefited from less interference by her manager, and she was given more interesting opportunities. Over time, she was able to ensure that her accounts and sales targets were aligned very closely with realistic forecasts. Naturally, her performance improved significantly and she felt greater job satisfaction, as she was not constantly 'fighting against the company'.

Her manager subsequently praised this salesperson, saying that she had matured incredibly, was now a senior role model within the group, and someone that he could both trust and rely on to be a star performer.

This case shows that simple changes in behaviour, which cost very little, have a big impact on real and perceived performance – something that we all know applies to managing customer relationships, but is equally important internally.

'Simple changes in behaviour have a big impact on real and perceived performance'

MANAGING YOUR MANAGER'S MANAGER

Although all good salespeople will manage their manager's manager, a word of caution is called for. There are many instances where this is far too transparent and can be perceived as fawning and overt manipulation.

Perhaps because salespeople get relatively little 'air time' with their boss's boss, or perhaps because they regard these senior individuals with too much respect, interactions can often be stilted and appear insensitive.

The best salespeople approach senior people internally with a similar style to the way in which they approach senior customer executives. In particular, they plan for the interactions, are clear on what their objectives are, treat the individuals with respect but are not fazed by them, understand the real issues that the senior person is facing and angle conversations towards helping them meet their challenges. They are generally very succinct in the questions that they ask and the points that they make, but remain flexible to respond to the individual and the situation.

contributor

Steve Hoyle is a founder of ProAct Business Development, a specialist global training and consulting business focusing on sales and sales management issues. Call 01372 459301 or email steve.hoyle@proactbd.org