

By Kevin Davis

## **Is your sales team producing far below potential?**

Mine was. Many years ago I inherited a sales team that was ranked dead last out of 64 offices. Our only producer was an 18-year veteran with the company. None of the other nine salespeople had more than one year of sales experience. Obviously, they/we were performing far below standards. The attitude in the office was pitiful. I heard a lot of excuses for poor performance like "lousy territory" and "our prices are too high". But what salespeople really lacked was a success role model.

Eighteen months later our office had moved up to number five, having posted the biggest increase in sales of any office in the company. Perhaps a few of the strategies I used will help you improve the performance of your sales team.

### **Step 1: Delay action in order to observe.**

When you first arrive on the scene of a sales team in distress, don't do anything. Take a few months to understand your organization's situation, gather information about the people involved, and....

### **Step 2: Study and assess your problem(s).**

My main problem was my salespeople didn't believe in themselves. They hadn't yet experienced success, and there was no role model, a salesperson of whom others can say, "there's somebody I can relate to who's successful."

You may be thinking, "Hey, isn't it my role as a sales manager to set a leadership example?" And, of course, the answer is "yes." But the example you set for your people is not enough, because many salespeople emulate the actions of their peers. Since many salespeople play "follow the leader," you've got to ask yourself which salespeople do your less experienced salespeople look up to? And, what kind of example are these "leaders" setting? You can get peak performance out of average producers if you can get average producers to emulate the success habits demonstrated by a leading salesperson. Clearly, I needed to find a leader. Fast.

### **Step 3: Find your "bell cow".**

On the ranch, the herd will follow along behind the one cow with a bell around its neck. Many salespeople, especially those with less experience, emulate the example of the team's "bell cow." So, it's important for you to study your team and identify who is the bell cow (informal leader)? Next, what example is your bell cow setting? Does he/she display excellent work habits? Or, does he/she simply sit back and "milk" the best territory? The example of work ethic and attitude that your bell cow displays for the team is, perhaps, even more important than the example you set for the team.

Hopefully, you already have a few players capable of stepping up. If so, talk to them. Help them see the importance of their success example, and ask them to share more of their talents, skills and energy with less experienced salespeople.

Unfortunately, I had no one on board capable of assuming the bell cow role, so I had to hire one. I knew that my next hire could play an important role in reversing the downward performance trend.

I had my new leader when hired Bill Zeeb. I told Bill, "if you stick with me, do exactly as I teach you to

do, you will be very successful." Bill knew that I was counting on him, and he didn't let me down. In his fourth month, he produced 200 percent of quota. Overnight, the attitude in the office changed from one of making excuses for poor performance to "what's that Bill Zeeb doing?" Bill's performance forced others to take a good, hard look in the mirror. That's the day when when my followers finally accepted responsibility for their poor performance.

#### **Step 4: Don't tolerate mediocre sales performance.**

You've got to stand firm - you won't tolerate mediocre sales performance. Far too often, poorly performing salespeople are allowed to continue their lackluster ways, acting like a dead weight on the rest of the team.

There are several reasons why sales managers hang on too long to poor performers. A manager may not want to face the hassle of recruiting a replacement, or, the manager may not have the time to recruit. This is a big mistake. The successful sales manager doesn't hesitate to "pull the trigger" when necessary. There's an old saying: there's only one thing worse than a salesperson that quits and leaves .. and that's a salesperson that quits and stays. You can talk all you want about minimum acceptable performance, but the fact is that your minimum acceptable performance standard is walking around in your sales area right now. Your lowest producer is your minimum acceptable standard.

Your objective is to escort low producers to "the intersection of choice." By that, I mean poor performers must make a decision themselves to either a) recommit themselves to engage in the behaviors and activities necessary for success, or b) leave the company immediately. The key question is this: if you knew then what you know now, is there anybody on your team you would not have hired? If so, get "hands-on" and escort that individual to his or her intersection of choice.

#### **Step 5: Install performance standards.**

Install performance standards. You've got to communicate your expectations. So raise the BAR on everybody with standards that consist of Behavior, Activity and Results. A behavior standard, for example, could be to arrive in the office every morning before 8 a.m. An activity standard could be to make a minimum of 25 telephone prospecting calls every day. A result standard could be that a sales rep with seven to nine months sales experience must sell a minimum of \$50,000 per month. On results standards, I recommend you set two standards. One, a lower "keep your job" standard. Salespeople who fall below the minimum standard for a three-month period are placed on probation. If sales don't pick up in the next quarter, that person must be "dehired." Another standard performance, is of course, a higher sales quota.

#### **Step 6: Dehire those below minimum standards.**

Dehire those below minimum standards. Your salespeople will be wondering, "do you really mean it?" The first person you dehire will send a loud and clear message - performance standards will be enforced. If you don't enforce them, your standards are meaningless.

#### **Step 7: Don't spend all your time with the salespeople who need you the most.**

One of the biggest mistakes managers make is to spend all their time with the low producers. But, when you think about it, if you increase their productivity by 20%, so what? Far better to spend your time with the people most capable of translating your coaching efforts into significant sales results. To identify who you should spend your time with.....

Conduct a "triage." A trauma center is set up to save the most lives possible, in the event of a disaster. That's why they quickly assess the wounded and segment them into three groups:

- A. Those who will survive, without immediate medical attention.
- B. Those who will die even if they receive immediate medical attention.
- C. And those who will live if they get attention, but will die if they don't.

If you've got limited time to coach, you want to spend your efforts on group C. Here's the rule: spend one-on-one time with your C players, group time with B players, and praise and recognize your A players.

### **Step 8: Cultivate a better "quality of life".**

Cultivate a better "Quality of Life." Have more fun. We instituted a series of contests that got everybody focused on a team goal. For example, if we hit our office goal, salespeople who achieved their individual standards earned a round of golf with the others. Then there were blitzes where everyone would pair up and make a bunch of sales calls into two sales territories to generate leads. The salespeople who receive the leads had to repay the group with a comedic skit. It was amazing to me how creative some of the skits were! The result: average sales per salesperson doubled, and turnover was reduced by 45 percent.

### **Step 9: Know what each salesperson wants.**

Know what each salesperson wants. Every person has his or her own personal motivators. Your job is to find out what they are and help the salesperson toward achievement. Sit down with each salesperson one-on-one. Try to learn something about each of them: what are their goals with your company and beyond? How can you help them be, have, and do more? For example, one of my salespeople wanted buy a house, while another wanted to play the top 10 golf courses in the world. Two very different goals, but both could be achieved faster by the salesperson exceeding quota.

Good selling!