Three Often Overlooked Topics to Enhance Sales Practice

Simon Dale

Why the three topics of Coaching, Change Management and Stakeholder Engagement should be considered more seriously in development of sales managers and sales professionals identified as high performers.

Introduction

I identified three topics I consider to be important to sales that were not usually taught or self-selected by salespeople, and that I believed would help out performance in the long term, as well as enhance their ability to manage other if they are on that career path. My project was centred on bringing the latest research and best practices in there topics to the attention of salespeople, with the key aim of encouraging them to engage on deeper learning journeys of their own in these topics, and improve their own practice as a result.

My first topic of **coaching** is a practice that is expanding and being used to help people in all industries and roles to improve performance. However, my own experience and investigation has that it is poorly understood and not widely practiced properly in sales. The first aim of my project was to show salespeople that there is benefit in both applying and receiving coaching, and use this as evidence for others to learn from.

My second topic is **stakeholder engagement** is a crucial skill to practice in both complex b2b selling, as well as in a matrix organisation. My own experience and observations have shown that this is an area that everyone can improve upon continually, especially in sales management roles. By introducing salespeople to modern best practices in this topic I aimed to encourage them to see this as another important topic to improve their own practice of both selling and getting their organisation to support them.

My third and final topic is **change management**. My inclusion of this was to show the salespeople that they should see change as a process, and map both onto their own environment as well as sales opportunities. Doing this would allow them to better qualify a customers' readiness to change, and thus affect a purchase decision, as well as think more deeply how they could apply change management to their own practices, particularly if they moved into management roles.

My project investigates the impact of formal intervention into the learning journey of high-performing salespeople. It is my belief that good practice of my three topics is crucial to high performance in sales and sales management, and that it is not consciously recognised or prioritised in general by salespeople and sales management that they can develop deeper expertise in these areas through further study.

My key research question is "*Will high-performing salespeople find value in the three topics that encourages them to practice them, go on their own learning journey and improve their own practice and performance*". Secondarily, I aimed to develop content that was reusable should it indeed prove useful, so that this could be used to scale out the impact of the intervention with others.

Methodology

Practically, my approach took the form of three methods:

1. Desk-based research on my three core topics of coaching, stakeholder engagement and change management, specifically in the context of how they apply to sales'

2. Formal lecture-style delivery of each topic to my sales volunteer participants;

3. Interviews with my volunteers as well as their managers at the beginning, during and end of my project, with an additional cross-referencing interview of my volunteers by the executive trainer of the SAP Academy to Action.

Qualitative Data

My first date gathering was from the five sales managers of my five sales volunteers, to set a baseline understanding of their current performance and competency in the three areas, if any. I chose the format of an interview in person or via phone depending on the manager location, in order to explore more deeply than just sending a questionnaire, as I expected the managers to give me a wider range of data when engaged interactively. Towards the end of my project I scheduled a review interview with the managers, to determine if they had observed any specific change in practice, and provide me with two sets of data to analyse. For both interviews I developed sets of structured questions for consistency across the group.

My second set of data gathering was from my five sales volunteers, also in the format of interviews of two types, and nearly all via phone other than few face-to-face thanks to coordinated travel opportunities.

Subsequent to each of my three lectures I planned to interview each volunteer individually to get their direct views on the content and their reflections on it and again developed structured questions for consistency. It was during these interviews that I applied coaching techniques where the opportunity presented itself, in order to help the volunteer think through their own application of my topics. I also did a final interview with them to gather their feedback on my project approach and their intentions on engaging with my topics further.

Quantitative Data

In order to bring a more empirical measure to my project, I decided to engage with our SAP sales operations team to analyse our CRM system data for my sales volunteers. SAP has standard KPIs for sales performance and working with our sales operations team I identified a set of these to work with, which would more likely be impacted by my intervention. Firstly, a baseline analysis of the volunteer's current business was made, with their permission, by extracting a view of their CRM KPIs before my project started. In addition, a broader set of data for all sales individuals were also extracted to create a reference control group. These additional sales individuals were the peer group of my volunteers who were all identified as high performers, and received the same initial standard training course Academy to Action, as well as the wider cohort of salespeople in their relevant countries.

Project Findings

Despite the short five month timeline of data available, there were distinct findings from the numerical analysis of the sales data that gave me reason to reflect on the impact of my project, attempt to validate this, and define further investigation.

Firstly, of my 11 focus performance indicators for analysis, my volunteer group averaged improvement in seven of them when compared with the wider Academy to Action group average. Furthermore, this out-performance was consistent when I compared the three Australian volunteers whit their wider peer group of all sales in the same country. I chose to narrow down this last comparison to one country group so that other potential influencing factors on performance such as the economic situation were normalised; thus any notable difference should therefore more likely be down to the

individuals.

One particular indicator showed a significant difference in the reduction of the "average number of days per phase" - a measure of the time taken for an opportunity to progress along the sales cycle, or in other words the velocity of an opportunity. For three of my volunteers there was a significant reduction in this, and during my qualitative analysis those three in particular has expressed positive engagement with my topic of coaching.

As I had specifically expressed the value of practising coaching due to the multiplier effect and this making more use of a wider team to progress sales opportunities, I theorised that there could be a connection between their improving practice and there results, and asked them for their views. One of them did agree that they had applied coaching and felt the results somewhat reflected this, whereas the other two did not agree that a connection could be made clearly.

I did not make any other strong causal connection between my three topics taught and the other indicators where my volunteers had improved more than the control group. However whilst reflecting on this I did postulate on how they as a group came to out-perform both the control group and their wider peer group.

A rewarding discover from my final interviews was that every volunteer had found my project valuable in some way, and that they were all attempting to practice at least on of my topics. Everyone was reflecting more on their approach to stakeholder engagement, and several were attempting to incorporate more coaching into their practice.

Whilst two volunteers specifically expressed engagement with the topic of change management, it was on reflection no surprise that this was the least taken up as it is the most difficult of the three topics to map directly to improving sales practice. My propostion to my volunteers had been that understanding change as a process could help them to be more consultative with their

sales approach, and better qualify if a customer is managing change well enough to support sales engagement. As this topic did not get as much traction as the others it has led me to reflect on how to invest more time in developing a stronger connection with sales practice for future delivery of my artefact content, and the research I would need to do to support this.

The managers of my volunteers observed varying improvement in the practice of coaching in four out of five. All managers thought that my three topics were very useful to be taught, especially stakeholder engagement and coaching, validating again the importance of these in complex business to business selling.

Whilst all of my volunteers did find my approach and content useful, the more experienced stated that it was more a validation of their own practice rather than all new knowledge. However, an incidental benefit of my approach to them in particular was the opportunity to hear from each other about relevant experience in these topic areas.

My intent of engaging my volunteers to embark on their own learning journey appears to have had impact. However sustaining this is a concern. The reading lists I provided were not utilised to the extent that I had hoped. Whilst some of the content was engaged with, the general feedback was that with the pressure of sales practice already at a high level, finding the time to read these was a challenge during the time of my project.

Conclusions

My key research question is: "Will high-performing salespeople find value in the three topics that encourages them to practice them, go on their own learning journey, and improve their practice and performance." I will now break this down and explain my conclusions.

Are my three topics considered important and of value by high-performing salespeople?

With the evidence presented here, I believe that the answer is yes, to the extent that my volunteers and their managers expressed their belief in the value, and engaged more deeply with the topics. I therefore recommend to sales enablement professionals everywhere that these topics be considered more seriously in high-performing salespeople and manger education and development.

I believe that the combination of topics is more powerful in application when combined together in sales practice. However recognition of this was not evident in my volunteer feedback. I conclude that this may be as each topic was a relatively new concept to my volunteers, and thus their ability to also reach this conclusion at this stage may be a stretch. It may also be that my view is biased by (at the time of my project) being in a role more aligned to wide-ranged business development than direct sales management, which requires such skills in more daily practice. I therefore conclude that the combination of topics may be more relevant to management levels and/or cross-regional roles than individual sales executives.

Have my three topics had a measured impact on sales practice?

Applicaiton in practice was validated by the volunteer's feedback and observed by their managers as well as the academy trainer. Improvements were noted by a few, whilst others were still validating whether their attempts were generating results that they considered positive. I conclude that more time is needed to observe my volunteer's practice in order to determine a measurable effect.

Have the three topics had a measured impact on sales performance?

My quantitative analysis showed that my volunteer group improved in performance as compared with their peers during my project. However, the direct link to my own intervention is tenuous, and I therefore conclude that my volunteers through their very self-selection into my project identified themselves as the highest performers. . To further prove my conclusion I would need to analyse their performance over a much longer period - say two full years of sales - to determine whether such a correlation held over time and was statistically significant. I would also need to apply a much more rigorous methodology and statistical analysis techniques by involving other experts in such areas in my analysis.

How can my project findings be better utilised to support sales enablement in the future?

Investigation with the sales enablement leader at SAP in Asia confirmed that the use of quantitative analysis to better target sales enablement interventions does not take place today. Thus I recommend that this approach be explored further as a way of improving on tge current methods, so that the individual impact of training may be targeted and measured more effectively. My volunteers found the sharing of "war stories" during my group sessions very valuable, but expressed disappointment that this does not happen enough at SAP. Further reflection of this led me to plan to investigate further for my own practice and recommend to SAP the proper application of the "social" aspect of action learning sets (Revans, 1983) as a way to support sales teams developing together more effectively.

Finally, reflecting on the challenges of high performers' learning (Argris, 1991) as related to the challenge of engaging my volunteers more with my reading lists, I resolved to explore further the role of sales managers in the learning process of salespeople and determine a course of action to engage at their level in order to provide a better environment that would support individual salespeople's learning journeys. This I would then implement in my own practice and recommend to other sales organisations.

About The Author

Simon Dale has spent 17 years working across Asia Pacific and Japan, 16 of those with SAP where he set up multiple new businesses in the region as part of the regional management team. Prior to that he spent eight years working across Europe for software companies in pre-sales management roles. For the past year he has been at MapR, a pre-IPO fast-growth software company in the big data space, running the APAC region and a sales team in seven countries. Dale is an active coach and mentor to start-ups as well as women in tech via Lean in.

Summary

"Impacting salesperson performance by engaging them on their own learning journey to transform their own practice" is a project delivered by Simon Dale on 1st January 2016 while at SAP as part of a Masters programme run by Consalia and Middlesex University. The project is an investigation into the impact of intervening in a salesperson's learning with topics not usual explicitly covered in detail in traditional sales training; namely, change management, coaching and stakeholder management. Five volunteer salespeople, already identified as high performers and placed on the SAP Academy to Action training course, were taken through an additional lecture and discussion series, coupled with individual discussions on the merits of the topics, Coaching techniques were sometimes applied in there discussions as a way to help them think through the topics' value and applicability, and to identify ways of applying them in their own practice.

The impact of the project was investigated both via qualitative interviews with the volunteers, their managers, and an executive trainer, as well as via quantitative analysis of changes in their key sales performance indicators before and after the project.

Every volunteer expressed that they found the project of value - both directly to me and also indirectly via the executive trainer - and that they have put one or more of my topics into practice. Several of them also indicated that they were aiming to embark on deeper engagement with the topics, supporting my aim of achieving this. Finally, as a group their sales indicators improved measurably more than their peer groups, which allowed me to postulate theories on why this was so and how this information could be better utilised in future.

My findings are that my three topics resonate well with salespeople, and that my approach does encourage them to engage more with the topics than they would have without it. I also found that there can be improvements in the way SAP identifies salespeople for training, and that there are gaps in how salespeople learn from each other.

I recommend that my three topics be considered more seriously in the development of sales professionals who are identified as high performers, as well as sales managers. To support this I have developed a "Transform your Sales Practice" training guide containing the material I used as well as a guide to the process of applying it.

I also recommend that the selection of high-performing salespeople for development can be improved both by better qualitative analysis of their past performance relative to their peers, as well as an improved manager and individual selection process that engages them fully in the qualification of their needs. Finally, I suggest areas of investigation for SAP and other organisations that would enhance the way salespeople learn from each other, and how to more systematically measure the impact of sales training interventions.

Simon Dale