



Online Sales and Customer Service Training

The 10 Common Sales Coaching Mistakes Closing the Coaching Gap

- Dean Mannix



Introduction

Conference after conference, article after article and meeting after meeting we are reminded “people are the company’s most important asset.” As a sales leader, I have no doubt most of you would agree with this.

I have a challenge with this statement for two reasons.

The first is that people aren’t “assets.” Unlike an asset, people have choice. They can choose what speed they’ll work at. They can choose what to prioritise. They generally get to choose which customers they spend most of their time on. You can’t buy and sell them. If you have ever managed a sales or service team you’ll know that despite being able to measure your people; you don’t have enough ownership to truly control them. The second challenge I have with this statement is most organisations behave in a manner that’s inconsistent with believing it. Imagine your company owned an IT system as its “most important asset,” and it performed as follows:

- If it took half of Monday to warm up and begin working to capacity; what would you do about it?
- If you noticed it was only working at half its potential speed, what would you do about it?
- If 40% of the system was consistently failing to complete important tasks; what would you do about it?
- If it prioritised unimportant processing tasks and sacrificed important ones; what would you do about it?
- If it crashed every Friday afternoon from about 2pm, what would you do about it?

I think most of you would be quite alarmed if this was going on in your business.

You would set up a task force to figure out what the causes of the issues were. You would hire experts to figure out how to solve the problem. You would designate people in your organisation to focus on the issues until they were resolved. You would personally stay on top of progress in solving the problem because of the amount of damage this would be causing. You would attack it all with a great sense of urgency.

But what if all of these issues related to your sales team? The scary thing is that there is a high probability that this describes a number of the people in your team. How much focus and intensity would you bring to solving that issue?

“The Coaching Gap”

If people drive your business then behaviours drive your success. If people genuinely are your most important asset, then as a leader, coaching and enabling the right behavior is your most important role.

How much of your peoples' success can you genuinely connect to your leadership and coaching? So when leaders tell me they are upset at their team's behaviour, what they're really telling me is that there is a change they need to make in the way they lead and coach performance. I call this the “coaching gap”- the gap between the behaviours you're currently experiencing and the behaviours that will make the team and your business a success.

The following are a number of coaching mistakes that I've correlated to this gap over the past 15 years of consulting in over 25 countries. As a leader, you need to take responsibility for your peoples' behaviour and as a coach you need to reflect on whether these are mistakes you're making on a consistent basis.

Mistake #1 – Mopping Up “Spilt Milk” on Monday Morning

One of the skills I was taught as a child was to move on from mistakes quickly and effortlessly. When I'd make a mistake my father would avoid getting angry and just say, “It's spilt milk. There's nothing you can do to change what's happened and the only question you should be asking is ‘what can I do now?’”

A sales leader asking people what they're up to for the week on a Monday morning (thinking this will increase productivity) is generally a futile exercise.

Their week is already set in motion. A lack of activity in the diary for the next 5 days is “spilt milk” and there's very little you can do about it on Monday morning. There's even less you can do about it if the discussion is happening in front of the rest of the team. Surely you can find a better use of peoples' time in the sales meeting?

Surely you can find more effective strategies for improving your peoples' productivity. If every customer meeting this week was similar to the meeting you have with your people on Monday morning, what sort of sales results would you expect to achieve?



Mistake #2 – Insufficient Use of Your People’s Time

The way you use your peoples’ time tells them how to use their time. If you put your needs and the use of your time ahead of your peoples’ interests they will put administration and the use of their time head of your customer’s interests.

When you call a meeting it’s critical you have valuable and timely reason for needing to see your people at a certain time. You have other options, such as engaging them on the floor in an ad hoc manner, picking up the phone or asking them to send you through information via email.

If you’re going to have a sales meeting every Monday morning you need to make sure it’s a valuable use of time for your people. You need to prepare for it like it’s your most important customer meeting for the week. If you’re going to have one on one coaching meetings with your people you need to make sure it’s more than just a catch up. You need to respect your people and make sure the meeting happens. You need to prepare for the session and send them a strong message you’re serious about their development and performance. You need to make sure they get a result from the meeting.

If your internal meetings are inefficient and failing to achieve results there is a high probability that your peoples’ meetings with customers are similar.

Mistake # 3 – Failing to Reset and Reconfirm Priorities

The biggest challenge your people face is managing their time and avoiding the productivity drop that commonly occurs when your people feel overwhelmed. As a leader, you need to be vigilant to avoid overwhelming your people and help them manage their priorities each week. If your organisation is “normal” your salespeople will be:

- Bombarded with requests from “up the line”
- Provided with a different campaign every month
- Told that a certain performance metric isn’t being met and that they have to down tools on everything else to focus on that metric
- Told to produce manual reports that have unreasonable deadlines
- Requested for information from other parts of the business Included in meetings in which they have no decision making power or specific purpose

And somewhere in between all of that, they have to sell and provide customer service excellence. Your role as the leader is to shift that paradigm and to make sure that all of this is done in between their sales and customer focused activity.

This means clarifying priorities on a weekly basis. This means understanding your peoples’ time management traps and helping them avoid these. This means shielding them and defending them from internal requests, even if they come from your boss! This means engaging your people one on one to help them make the right prioritisation choices on a daily basis. Don’t mistake providing sales targets for helping people manage their priorities.

Mistake #4 – Coaching High Level “What” and Missing the “How”

Simply telling people they need to “do better” is rarely enough to create sustainable improvements in performance and engagement. Telling people they need to be more “customer focused” and that they need to “do more cross-sell” is an improvement, but still lacks the specificity required for quality coaching.

This is just more “what” and because it’s so vague and discretionary, your people will convince themselves they are already achieving the desired result. As a leader, you need to go beyond telling your people “what” to do and make sure you’re also coaching them on “how” to do it.

Explaining on Monday morning that you want all of your people to have a referral discussion with a minimum of two customers during the week can be coached. Providing them with three options for having the discussion that include specific scripting makes executing the task and coaching it much easier for both you and your people. Explaining when to engage in the discussion makes executing the task and coaching it much easier. Setting a deadline to get at least one done by Wednesday lunch time gives you something specific to ask about and discuss in general discussions on Wednesday afternoon and Thursday. Diarising strategies gives you something specific to ask about when people return from customer meetings. It gives you something specific to observe if you go to joint meetings.

The reason so little valuable coaching happens is that we fail to set ourselves up for success. The more specific the activity requested (“what”) and the more specific the guidelines for execution (“how”), the easier it becomes to coach. The more specific our follow up strategies are, the more likely it becomes that the coaching will happen. Please note – none of the follow up strategies suggested included putting another meeting in your peoples’ diaries!

Mistake # 5 – Focusing on Quantity Alone

A salesperson’s success or failure will significantly depend on the quantity of calls, meetings and communication they have with their customers and prospective customers.

Show me a salesperson with a conversion ratio of above 50% and I’ll expose you someone that’s not talking to enough people. Having said that, I can vividly remember a sales leader grabbing me in the second day of a coaching workshop and explaining a coaching discussion they experienced the previous afternoon.

“I had to speak to one of my team members about a credit challenge and before I got the phone I asked them how they had gone with their meetings for the week. The team member very sheepishly explained they had only achieved three meetings for the week. Instead of chastising them for not achieving the 5 expected, I decided to take a different tack and asked them how the meetings went? I could hear the team member’s shock and once they had recovered we had a great discussion about the meetings they had done and came up with some really good ideas on how to move them forward. I realised that these sorts of discussions hadn’t been happening because my focus on the pure number of meetings was shutting my people down.

Peoples' behaviours are significantly impacted by the confidence they have in being able to achieve an outcome. The more we coach our people to recognise achievement and achieve more in the meetings and calls they do, the more motivated they get to increase the number of calls and meetings. Coaching quality is just as important as enforcing quantity and arguably more so.

Mistake # 6 – Focusing on Effects and Ignoring Causes

A sales leader ultimately gets measured and judged on sales results such as higher revenue, wider product penetration and improved customer satisfaction scores.

I challenge any organisation that says this is not the case. If you want to argue this with me make sure you bring along examples of sales leaders that have failed on these criteria and still managed to achieve “Exceeds Expectations” on their performance review.

These are “effects” and effects can't be coached because they've already happened! If you want to achieve fantastic customer satisfaction scores make sure you're discussing fantastic customer service experiences in your sales meetings. Make sure you're brainstorming how to apply customers on their current perceptions of your customer service. Make sure you're discussing specific strategies for engaging customers on their current perceptions of your customer service. Make sure you're coaching how to understand the process for conducting surveys and know how to gain customer support for responding to surveys.

These are the “causes” of great customer satisfaction scores and these are the things you need to coach. The same obviously goes for increasing sales revenue and improving product penetration.

Mistake # 7 – Measuring Too Much

We all know that what gets measured gets managed and gets done. But what happens when we measure too much?

We once conducted an initial coaching interview with a number of Branch Managers in a financial institution. What was fascinating about these discussions was that 69% of the Branch Managers claimed to be the number one performer in their respective areas. It didn't surprise us to find out that they were provided with over 25 indicators of success and failure each week.

As a leader, you need to make the connection between the results you're driving for and the behaviours that will get you those results. You need to have the courage to call out the three most important behaviours each of your people needs to engage in to be more successful.

You also need to be able to consistently measure whether these behaviours are being executed in the field. And you need to be able to prove and coach a direct correlation between the execution of certain behaviours and the results you've called out as important in the business.

Beyond measuring these three behaviours and key outcomes, other measurements are generally only useful in the hands of an analyst. Bombarding your people with too much data generally just confuses them on what the real priorities are. It also gives them too many options for claiming success in one area and ignoring failure in other more important areas. Measure and coach what matters because focusing on “everything” is focusing on nothing!

Mistake # 8 – Failing to Analyse Success

Unfortunately, most leaders become more emotional about, and pay significantly more attention to failures than they do to successes.

This is an issue for two reasons. The first is that failure is part of being successful in sales. When a leader makes a huge issue out of failure, the response they generally evoke in their people is to stop them taking risks. When more time is spent analysing failure than success the message is quite clear – don’t fail! The problem with that is where the genuine conversion rate for new business is less than 50%, you actually have to fail more often than you succeed to reach your sales potential.

The second issue is that every success is an opportunity to codify and systematise success in a way that can be shared across the entire business. The more you analyse successes, the more you start to see patterns and the more you can build them into the processes your people use. The more you analyse success, the larger your menu of coaching strategies becomes. The more you analyse success and engage your team in the process, the more they learn and the more you reinforce the value you place on taking sales “risks”.

Let me make an important point. I use the word analyse instead of celebrate very deliberately. They’re two different things and simply saying congratulations and asking a Salesperson to tell everyone about the deal is not what I would describe as “analysing.”

Mistake # 9 – Allowing Limiting Beliefs to Thrive

Your peoples’ behaviour is also a reflection of what they believe.

If your coaching is poor they’ll believe performance is not important to you. If you waste their time in meetings they believe time management and urgency is not important. If they believe the “other team provides terrible service” they won’t cross-refer. If they believe one of your products is completely uncompetitive they’ll be reluctant to sell it. If they believe cross-sell is about shoving extra products down a customer’s throat they won’t do it. If they believe it’s aggressive to close a deal, you’ll have a lot of prospective customers “thinking about it.” If they believe achieving budget is high performance, there’s a good chance they’ll lose their sense of urgency when they meet their targets. If they believe “management” doesn’t get it, they’ll always have an excuse for poor performance.



The point is that as a Leader every limiting belief you allow to go unchallenged is damaging your peoples' ability to perform.

The question is - do you know what beliefs are limiting your people and are you challenging these beliefs?

Mistake # 10 – Accepting Mediocrity

Your people's standards are a reflection of your standards.

If you're late for meetings they will be late for customer meetings. If you accept half-hearted participation and responses in meetings they will do the same with their customers. If you're not genuinely passionate about improving their ability to execute the causes of success they'll be ambivalent about their personal development. If you cancel their development meeting because another more important internal meeting was called, they will not book customer meetings because another internal report is due.

Your people's behaviours are driven by their perception of the standards that you and those around them expect of one another. If you allow one person in the team to consistently fail to meet their activity promises you let the entire team down. You damage the motivation of those that are genuinely trying and invite them back into their comfort zone. You damage the motivation of those meeting the minimum targets and cause them to think that achieving minimums is high performance. And you damage the motivation of your performers because they start to question whether they're genuinely part of a high performing team.

If your peoples' standards are higher than your own, there's a good chance those people are in the market for a new Leader.



Conclusion

This isn't meant to be an exhaustive list of all the coaching mistakes salespeople have to face in the field.

What I hope it does is get you thinking about your leadership and coaching strategies; whether you're going through the motions or genuinely impacting your people's performance; whether you're coaching because you're told you need to or because you're genuinely passionate about your people's success and enjoyment of their work and their customers.

As a leader, you have a responsibility to the people in your team.

Never underestimate the impact leadership and coaching can have both in the positive and the negative sense.

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