



Is Sales Going to Hell in a Handbasket?

In the Good ol' Days, IBM, Xerox, ADP, and Pitney-Bowes, trained the American salesforce. Sales management training was also a staple of these companies' learning and development programs. As the saying goes, "Forget about the Good ol' Days, you're lucky they lasted as long as they did."

Said another way, long, intensive rep onboarding and Front-Line Sales Management (FLSM) development programs are from a bygone era. This doesn't mean the need has gone away, only the programs. Today's training and coaching is more about getting up to speed quickly, often with self-pacing online tutorials, microlearning segments, and more recently, with AI-enabled coaching.

Not unlike earlier times, however, most of these programs are focused on sellers, not FLSMs. This is both a perplexing and continuing strategy. I have always thought the training budget allocation (80% on sellers/20% on managers) should be flipped. There are legitimate reasons for doing so. When you train a seller, 1 person benefits; when you train a manager, that person plus their direct reports (typical span of control being ~6) can benefit from the training. In addition, managers tend to be less transient, giving the company a longer period over which to recoup return on their training investment.

The typical path to FLSM is the promotion of a successful seller. This can be a double whammy since the skills for being a top producer are vastly different from being a top manager. The saddest scenario is a top producer being promoted to FLSM, struggling, perhaps for the first time, then becoming disillusioned and leaving the company. Everyone loses!

Absent this massive reallocation/reorientation of training funds, newly minted managers with little or no management training follow one of three paths: 1) copy what peers are doing; 2) repeat what their managers did to/for them; or 3) do what they swore they'd do differently if ever made manager!

The first two of these options simply perpetuates, rather than elevates, the manager's activities. If the predecessor was a good manager, hopefully, the new manager will have inherited good traits. If not, well, not so good. Emulating peers may, or may not, be a winning formula. Just like mirroring the way some people are exercising at the gym, they may or may not know what they're doing but, since they appear to be in good shape, you copy their form.

Thirdly, charting your own different course is simply trial and error. Some new/different ideas may work, others may not; if only someone had some insights to offer! Of course, management models abound, but if you're too busy trying to figure out the saw, who has time to sharpen it?



The Sales Management Association surveyed companies on 26 FLSM responsibilities. Companies rated their managers effective in 9 of 26. The top seven rated responsibilities are listed below.

Factors	Percentage of Firms	
	Important to Firm	Firm is Effective
Monitor, Drive Sales Pipeline	92%	58%
Hold Salespeople Accountable for Performance	82%	51%
Motivate Salespeople to Achieve	81%	59%
Improve Salespeople's Customer Effectiveness	80%	53%
Improve Salespeople's Overall Selling Competence	78%	54%
Provide Performance Feedback to Salespeople	78%	56%
Coach Salespeople On Account Strategy	77%	50%

Note, these are the highest rated factors; the remaining nineteen on this list fell beneath the 50% line. This may come as no surprise but, does that mean it's acceptable? Or does it simply mean it's unavoidable? Just like sellers, the strong will make it, the weak will be weeded out. Sink or swim, Baby.

But wait, there's more. As if this were not enough, the situation in many cases has actually gotten worse. Yes, there are many FLSMs today that have been promoted with little/no management training. Yes, they are overseeing teams that have not had the benefit of traditional training programs with long runways described earlier.

Sales has always suffered not having a pure career path. Being a surgeon with 20 years' experience means you've demonstrated competence and staying power. Being a sales rep for 20 years, not a sales manager, not a sales director or VP, means... Well, what does it mean? Mainly, that you haven't gotten very far!

Because of this, I believe many reps sign up/step up to the management path buying the "this will be good for your career" speech. But will it?

It's a different skill set. Sure, both roles are people-oriented, but the biggest difference is pursuing results through the actions of others, rather than your own. They're both important but they are also, uniquely different. Recognizing this difference, and the difficulties it may create, some companies have a more rigorous approach to identifying FLSM candidates. ADP, for one, requires a candidate to be nominated by his/her director, not simply their immediate manager. If accepted, they receive basic management training, while still operating as a seller. Once this initial training is completed, they are then assigned TWO reps to manage, again, while still operating as a seller. This trial period typically lasts six months. At the end, candidates are clear, they are well suited to—or want no part of—becoming a sales manager.



In conclusion you might ask, “Is sales going to hell in a handbasket? Are FLSMs doomed to struggle in today’s challenged and challenging marketplace?”

Unquestionably, the well-documented power shift from sellers to buyers has enabled buyers to get better at buying faster than sellers have gotten better at selling. The pandemic has further accelerated and compressed these changes.

When sellers had all the product and application information, new hires could get started with product and basic sales training. In their first couple of years, they’d pick up customer stories and clever usage applications. Only after this initial ramp would buyers ask questions like, “What do you know about me?” and “What do you know about my business?”

Today these are table stakes whether you’ve been onboard selling 10 years or 10 minutes. You need to bring your “A Game” and demonstrate relevance and competence immediately. With buyers conducting their initial research online and avoiding sellers as much, and as long, as possible, a lot of requirements are fixed before a seller is even brought in.

All of this is making both sellers’ and managers’ jobs harder, more stressed, and more pressured. Zoom meeting fatigue is just the latest log thrown on the fire atop, CRM (e.g., Salesforce, Dynamics), sales engagement (e.g., Outreach, Salesloft), sales enablement (e.g., Highspot, Seismic), lead management (e.g., Pardot, Marketo), social (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook), and more! Application fatigue, keeping current, and running hard to develop and deliver authentic, value-added insights is a grind.

At this most challenging time, it’s important to remember we’re talking about people, not units of quota. And as you think of your sales/manager athletes, think of this not as an unending, or even yearlong marathon. Instead, picture a series of sprints (clear, near-term, focused initiatives) with rest and recovery periods figured in.