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Move salespeople up — or out

By Steve Johnson

Every sales organization has at least one — a salesperson who consistently fails to meet his or her numbers. They may goof off when they are supposed to be calling customers, or make plenty of appointments but can't seem to close anything. If you're a sales manager, these low performers no doubt make you and everyone else miserable. There's always one who seems to keep you wringing your hands, but for a variety of reasons you keep giving them one more chance.

Sound familiar? It's time to deal with your low performer. It may not be pleasant, but it's far better than the alternative.

First off, consider that low performers inevitably drive high performers away. Great salespeople don't want to work in an environment where mediocrity is tolerated. Further, low performers eat away at your coaching time. They infect everyone else's attitude and mental outlook, pollute the sales culture and reduce overall performance.

“Make sure you have a **STRONG BENCH** at all times”

Of course, we all know it's wrong to let untalented or unmotivated people slide. But when theory meets reality, we balk. We don't know what to say, when to say it, or how to follow up. So too often, we do nothing — even if we recognize the long-term consequences. It doesn't have to be this way.

For starters, make sure you have a strong bench at all times. If you have four or five strong candidates in the pipeline, you don't have to suffer a low performer. They know they must produce or risk being replaced. But if you have no bench to draw from, you will probably feel that it's better to keep a warm body around, even if that body hasn't sold anything in weeks. This is why it is critical to never lose sight of the ABR principle — Always Be Recruiting.

The reality is, turnover isn't necessarily a bad thing. There will always be some low performers, and you don't want to keep them around any longer than 60 to 90 days. If you don't know the proper procedure already, check with HR to see what you need to do to start documenting and forging your paper trail.

Go into your first “low performer” meeting armed with concrete data. You need to know exactly where the low performer stands in terms of sales numbers. If the individual is bringing in 30 percent less revenue than the next-lowest-performing colleague, you need to have that statistic pinned down ahead of time. This is why some businesses make use of an office scoreboard, openly tracking sales by rep. Not only does this tactic spark healthy competition between staff, it lets your salespeople know where they stand at all times. That way, their bottom-of-the-totem-pole status will not be a complete surprise when you need to address it.

In the initial meeting, ask some basic open-ended questions. “Why do you think your numbers are down? Where have your challenges been lately? What made you come to work here? What has changed since then? What are your personal goals?” From the answers to these questions, you should be able to determine whether the person simply isn't good at the job, or

“You should be able to tell whether the problem is due to **A LACK OF SKILL OR A LACK OF WILL**, and that determines your next step”

whether he or she is good at the job but just isn't doing enough. You should be able to tell whether the problem is due to a lack of skill or a lack of will, and that determines your next step.

If it's a skill issue, set up practice situations. Let the salesperson spend time working with top performers. Schedule a one-on-one training session. Send them to a training event. You might find that a little coaching goes a long way, and that your low performer rises to the occasion. If not, at least you gave the individual a chance.

If it's a will issue, work with the low performer to set up a plan. It may be that your low performer has a decent closing ratio, but makes relatively few appointments. Perhaps they are sleeping in late each morning or running a lot of personal errands during work hours. You must let the salesperson know this laziness or lack of focus is unacceptable. Work together to create a shape-up plan — making it clear that the alternative to shaping up is shipping out.

Either way, use hard numbers. Collaborate with the salesperson to set specific quotas. Whether your low performer is dropping the ball due to skill issues or will issues, you must establish a concrete goal for them to work toward. Focus on things the salesperson can control: 50 cold calls by Wednesday of next week, for example. Make sure the salesperson feels confident that they can meet the goal. Finally, put the action plan in writing for both of you — coach and salesperson — to sign. The signatures serve as an extra layer of accountability for both of you.

Hold regular goal-setting meetings with your low performer, in which you review performance from the previous period, then

create and commit to short-term actions for the upcoming period (you should be holding such meetings with all your salespeople, but they are especially critical for low performers.) Once again, have the low performer sign off on the agreed-upon goals. Between meetings, check in constantly. Goal setting, combined with persistent follow-up, will drive a low performer either up or out.

If you must fire the low performer, confront the situation head-on and tell the truth, saying, “We're trying to build a culture of high performance here and you aren't living up to our standards.” Another alternative is to say, “You have consistently failed to hit your goals. I believe you can be very successful doing something else, but this company is not the right fit for you.”

Finally, be aware that you need to become comfortable with addressing performance issues. You cannot lead a sales team yet live in fear of conflict. Besides, when someone truly is failing at selling, you're not doing any favours by letting it slide. The fact that someone isn't suited for your company doesn't mean they are a bad person. Just because someone can't play golf doesn't mean he or she can't be a brilliant concert pianist. But by not freeing your low performer to move on to their next career stage, you're hurting them as well as yourself.

Steve Johnson has developed hundreds of selling programs for clients such as Morgan Stanley, Countrywide Financial, UBS Financial Services and Enterprise Rent-A-Car. He is the author of the best-selling If You're Not Out Selling, You're Being Out Sold and Selling Is Everyone's Business: What It Takes to Create a Great Salesperson.

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