

An Executive's Guide to Being a Coach

By Nicholas T. Miller

There are many definitions of coaching. Is there a simple model that experienced managers can use in a professional setting to know whether they're on the right track or not? How do you know when you're coaching? How do your people know they're being coached?

When Am I Coaching?

Corporate climate surveys and interviews repeatedly indicate that employees feel they are not coached enough, that they are not clear enough about expectations, that they get too little feedback. Consultants, academics, human resources professionals, some senior managers, and almost all corporate training departments press continually for managers to dedicate more time to coaching. Yet neither managers nor their direct reports can reliably tell you when “coaching” is taking place and whether anyone has been coached.

Why? There is no shared definition. Sales managers, sales people, and trainers describe coaching based on what they've experienced, in terms of activities, among them:

- Expectation setting
- Coaching disciplines
- Feedback about results
- Pushing for skills to improve
- Lots of short interval feedback and management

The resulting gumbo mixes old athletic coach models with new age mumbo jumbo, academic research, and training program models to produce frustration and confusion. Since business leaders and sales managers have precious little time for any task, we need definitions of “what's a coach” and “what's coaching” that experienced managers can use.

Define the Coaching Context

To begin, coaching is a process, not a thing, not an event, not a single type of discussion. The coaching process serves a purpose; you coach to reach an objective. The coaches we've met begin thinking about coaching by answering three questions:

- Why am I coaching? What's the objective?
- What are the circumstances? How much damage is done if we don't achieve the goal?
- Who am I coaching? What do they need from me in order to fulfill the purpose?

Their answers to these three questions help them set priorities in terms of their commitment of time to coaching, the frequency and extent of coaching conversations, and their coaching focus.

Specify Your System

Successful coaches have developed “systems” that work and that they can teach so that other people can successfully reach meaningful goals. The primary responsibility of executive-level sales managers is to define (or have others define) the “success path” or “system” which will enable their reps to be successful.

Watch any successful team manager, from sales to symphonies to soccer fields, and you’ll see a system. Dig into any successful franchise operation; you’ll find a system that enables ordinary people to produce extraordinary results repeatedly. The system defines performance in detail:

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- The correct activities
- Done at the correct time
- At the correct frequency
- In the correct manner.

People who are serious about reaching a particular objective flock to good coaches because they know the coaches have systems to get the job done and that, if they use the coaches’ systems, they’ll be successful.

In sales, this means having a “pilot’s manual” that describes how your company and your team, and everybody on it, does business. The manual documents your business development and sales management process in detail – the correct activities, the correct timing, the proper frequency, and specific methods.

For example: When do you meet with your sales reps for coaching? What topics do you cover? What does an acceptable proposal look like, how many of them should someone submit in a year to be successful?

If you can’t define the optimal performance system for your sales team, you’re not well positioned to coach.

Work the System on Three Levels

When developing and implementing their systems, coaches work on three levels:

- **Strategic** – the game plan. In sales, this includes establishing a mission for the team, profiling target customers, choosing products or services to emphasize, and deploying sales resources to customers.
- **Statistical** – the relationships between activities and results. This means connecting data about sales process (i.e. steps activities) to sales results so you can prioritize activities and predict results.
- **Behavioral** – what people do and how. This includes sales call behaviors, internal and external communications, and personal management.

The more senior the sales executives, the more attention they should pay to the “strategic” and “statistical” aspects of the system and implementation of sales team strategies.

When executive sales managers meet with their direct reports (regional, district, or sales team sales managers), they should coach at all three levels:

- Observe performance at all three levels (strategic, statistical, behavioral)
- Note gaps between what you see and what your system says you should see
- Communicate observations to sales managers
- Where necessary, instruct sales managers as to what to do, when to do, or how to do strategy implementation, activity management, or specific sales behaviors.

Executive sales managers’ expectations, coupled with feedback and consequences, change sales management behaviors. The changed sales management behaviors drive sales activities and sales results. Sales managers who are directly coaching individual sales people should work through the same three levels of coaching with their sales reps.

Do You Get Style Points

Style is important. As a coach, you have to connect with your team members to communicate. You have to enroll them in your vision of what is possible for the team and why it’s worth getting up in the morning.

At the same time, remember what they want from you. They want to know you can help them be successful. If you can demonstrate that your system works, you’ll tend to attract people who want to work for you... and the people who work for you already will be more willing to adapt their styles to yours because they know, in the end, they’ll reach their goals if they follow your coaching.

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