



# OPPORTUNITY THROUGH ADVERSITY

LEADING YOUR SALES  
TEAM THROUGH  
UNCERTAIN TIMES

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# INTRODUCTION

**Uncertainty creates anxiety.** 2020 has brought great adversity and uncertainty to our communities, businesses, and human experience. We have faced uncertainty in health, uncertainty regarding employment, economic uncertainty, and we have even faced uncertainty for how we perform our jobs in a new environment.

Enter the sales manager. Sales leadership has two fundamental responsibilities:

1. Achieve the business results expected by the company
2. Help each member of the team reach their full potential

A role that can be challenging even when times are good, the job of a sales manager becomes exponentially more difficult during times of adversity.

Numerous studies point to the significance of coaching in supporting sales leadership responsibilities. The more coaching a sales representative or account manager receives, the more likely they are to achieve or exceed plan. The statistics speak for themselves.



# THE NUMBERS

According to Aberdeen Research, companies that provide real-time, deal-specific sales coaching increased revenue by 8.4% year-over-year – *a 95% improvement over companies that don't provide that level of coaching!*

**8.4%**

**19%**

A recent Harvard Business Review report illustrates that top-quality coaching will improve the results of the middle 60% of a workforce by up to 19%.

Also from Harvard Business Review, 11% higher revenue was realized for companies that focused 3+ hours a month managing their sales reps' pipelines.

**11%**



# THE APPROACH

## **The importance of coaching cannot be overstated.**

However, a significant number of sales managers lead and coach intuitively. In the face of competing priorities, they often simply react to the situation before them. Leading a sales team – especially through times of adversity – requires a thoughtful and purposeful approach based on intent.

The following best practices will support your ability to intentionally lead and coach through times of adversity, and ultimately, drive strong performance.





# LEADERSHIP BEST PRACTICES

## 1. DRIVE CONSISTENCY & CADENCE

**If uncertainty creates anxiety**, one essential tactic for sales leaders is to remove uncertainty to the greatest extent possible. In times of uncertainty, people crave consistency and predictability.

*During the COVID-19 pandemic, the CEO of an enterprise healthcare company held 10-15 minute daily video conferences for employees where he shared key information and addressed questions. While the content of his message was important, it was the **consistent communication from leadership** that brought comfort.*

Implementation of a consistent communication cadence is essential. Whether in good times or in periods of adversity, consistency in communication and coaching improves morale and performance.

So often, sales leaders share they are “always available” and will “address needs of the team as they arise”. While on-the-fly coaching and off-the-cuff interactions are fine as supplemental communication, they cannot be your primary approach.

Especially in times of adversity, representatives may experience uncertainty about many elements of their work – when they’ll next speak with their manager, what the content of that conversation will be, how their manager is thinking and feeling, and what is happening in the company overall.

Uncertainty creates anxiety; implementing a regular communication cadence for team calls and 1:1 conversations creates predictability and consistency. As a sales leader, you should focus your attention and prioritize quality communication at known, scheduled, and predictable times.



# LEADERSHIP BEST PRACTICES

## 2. FLEX YOUR STYLE

**We all have a default leadership/coaching style.** Some use an authoritarian style; some are collaborative; others are servant leaders; and some apply a hands-off approach.

There are a number of styles, and it is essential to know your default style – and the style that best supports the success of each individual team member.

As a sales leader, it is imperative you show up for each member of your team with the style that best supports their success (rather than subconsciously applying your default style to every member of the team).

During times of adversity, there is one style that is never effective – the hands-off style. This style breeds uncertainty, and amidst challenging times the sales manager cannot simply leave members of their team to face the situation alone.



# LEADERSHIP BEST PRACTICES

## 3. PRIORITIZE WHAT MATTERS MOST

**Remember, times of uncertainty and anxiety also take a toll on your team members' personal lives.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, people adjusted to a new work reality, but they may have also faced uncertainty regarding their health, employment, their spouse's employment, their kids' education, and the health of family members.

Show compassion for the personal hurdles your team may be facing, and be clear about priorities. Asking people to focus on unimportant or irrelevant tasks is detrimental to overall performance. Drive focus toward the few things that matter most to the business.



# LEADERSHIP BEST PRACTICES

## 4. DOUBLE DOWN ON DEVELOPMENT

**Challenging times often bring a tightening of budgets; however, improving or accelerating performance is really the only way out of them.** As the saying goes, “You cannot cut your way to prosperity.” Performance optimization requires the business development team to operate at peak ability.

By increasing their skill, capability or knowledge through development, your investment helps equip the team to navigate challenging times, and demonstrates commitment to them.

Additionally, if things get really tough and members of the business development team need to be down-sized, you have improved their desirability in the employment market.

As a sales leader, the darkest days are those that require a termination of employment. Knowing that you have invested in your team and made each member more marketable will ease the difficult emotions you will experience.



# LEADERSHIP BEST PRACTICES

## 5. CONTINUE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

**Active performance management must continue through adverse times.** Normal and customary business processes bring consistency and certainty, so they must be continued.

However, it may be necessary to adjust expectations or goals through challenging times. Doing so demonstrates you are connected to the reality of the situation and care about the success of your team members. If goals or objectives are adjusted, it should be done using the company's formal documentation for doing so.

Beyond the formal performance management practices, it is important for sales leaders to chart their team and reflect on some key questions.



*The bonus resource enclosed with this whitepaper is a valuable tool to help in your reflection and consideration!*



# CONCLUSION

**This document is intended to support your efforts.** Leading through good times is simple... leading through adversity is when sales leaders earn their stripes. Uncertainty creates anxiety, and it's important to do anything possible to remove uncertainty with fact-based clarity.

The value of coaching cannot be overstated. In terms of sales leadership priorities, coaching is one of the most critical ways to support achievement of expected results and help team members achieve their potential. Focusing on quality coaching and removing uncertainty will create the best possible path to the good times that are sure to come!



## SALES TEAM PERFORMANCE GRID EXERCISE

Charting your team on a simple grid of performance and emotional engagement supports an important reflection of each team member by the sales leader. This important exercise can be done easily and efficiently.

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Rank your team from top to bottom in order of performance using whatever metrics are important to your business.
2. Categorize the ranked list on a simple curve. For example:
  - A's = top 20%
  - B's = next 30%
  - C's = next 30%
  - D's = bottom 20%
  - NEW = representatives who are too new in their tenure for metrics to truly capture the essence of their performance (often less than one year).
3. Consider the emotional engagement of each team member. Are they positive, neutral or negative?



## INSTRUCTIONS

4. Chart each person by placing their name in the corresponding box on the attached grid.
5. Ask yourself key questions regarding each individual, such as:
  - *Where is this person on the grid?*
  - *Where have they been in the past?*
  - *What contributed to the change?*
  - *Where do I want them to be?*
  - *What is required to help them get to where I want them to be?*
  - *What role have/do I play in this person's place?*





# Sales Team Performance Grid

Plot your team in the following editable fields:

|                      |                                   | EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT |         |          |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|---------|----------|
|                      |                                   | Positive             | Neutral | Negative |
| PERFORMANCE CATEGORY | <b>A</b><br>↑ 20%<br>(81% - 100%) |                      |         |          |
|                      | <b>B</b><br>30%<br>(51%-80%)      |                      |         |          |
|                      | <b>C</b><br>30%<br>(21% - 50%)    |                      |         |          |
|                      | <b>D</b><br>↓ 20%<br>(1% - 20%)   |                      |         |          |
|                      | <b>New</b>                        |                      |         |          |



# SALES TEAM PERFORMANCE GRID

## EXERCISE REFLECTION

### NEGATIVE A'S REPRESENT THE BIGGEST RISK TO YOUR BUSINESS

Due to their strong performance, they are likely viewed as leaders. This leadership role may be dangerous if their attitude is corrosive. The strong performance of Negative A's causes most sales leaders to avoid addressing their poor attitude or engagement. This group must be addressed; even if it means moving them out of the organization

### POSITIVE A'S NEED TO BE EMBRACED AND INSPIRED

Appeal to the important role they play as a peer leader. Retention of this group is essential.

### THE PERFORMANCE OF THE D'S NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED IMMEDIATELY

The classic question of 'skill or will' is at hand with this group. The sales leader must ask if people in this performance category have the desire and ability to move up the performance curve.

- If the answer is yes, a personal development plan needs to be implemented.
- If the answer is no, the person must be removed from the organization.

*Of course, all appropriate company policies must be followed and consultation with human resources is required when considering an adverse action.*

### REMEMBER, THE PERFORMANCE OF THE D'S IS LIKELY WASHING OUT THE PERFORMANCE OF THE A'S

This emphasizes the importance of the middle categories, the B's and C's. Sustainable performance change occurs when the middle moves up.