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Managers can change behavior of their salespeople

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#)

Have you hired a sales professional because you think they bring all the sales skills to the table and you won't have to manage them?

Most managers look for the ideal salesperson, one who doesn't require any direction, management or coaching. But how can you improve sales and competencies if you don't direct, manage or coach? Even the best seller can lose motivation and develop poor habits.

Those managers who understand and know how to change individual behaviors are in the best position to build and maintain a strong competitive team.

A common myth is that people don't change. That's only partially true. People will change, if there's the right positive consequence for them to make a change.

It's no secret that all behaviors are purposeful. People do what they do because of the results they get. We do something to get something we want. Or we do something to avoid something we don't want. Either way, there's a consequence that directs our behavior.

Management styles are a dime a dozen, but effecting change doesn't happen by flying by the seat of your pants. Changing behavior is like building a bridge, driving a car or anything else that requires precision, consistency and the use of established procedures.

The following principles are key and worth remembering.

- First, effecting change requires a significant investment of time and energy. You must be willing to make the investment.

Making significant skill and behavior changes may take two, three or four days in the field with a seller. We only have to look at any of our favorite sports teams to recognize the effort and practice that goes into developing a skill.

There are thousands of reasons why there's not enough time to invest a few days in the field. Consider how much time it requires to change personnel and get a new salesperson started with their own set of challenges, not to mention lost opportunities. A few days is a small investment.

For example, one sales manager didn't like the way his team of 14 salespeople were starting

their sales calls. They weren't setting direction, and not leading the call in a way to have a productive interview.

Because of the difficulty seeing decision-makers, he realized they couldn't meet their numbers unless calls became more effective very quickly. They discussed it in their monthly sales meeting, and then the manager spent two or three days with each representative, making several calls a day.

First, they would rehearse before the call. The salesperson then made the call without interruption while the manager observed. Then they would debrief each call. This process continued until the manager was comfortable with each person's competency.

That manager's team was the top-performing district out of nine national teams for last year. The investment required was approximately one month's field time. This manager made the investment and reaped a healthy return.

- Second, to effect change, feedback must be immediate.

Remember people do or avoid things because of the outcomes they experience. It's easy to grasp the power of this by looking at animal trainers. Shamu the whale performs to get the reward he wants -- a bucket of fish. Animal trainers know they can't give Shamu a reward tomorrow for circling the tank today, because there's not an immediate reward association.

Sellers also respond best when they receive recognition or reward immediately, conditioning the desired behaviors.

For example, let's look at call reports that are always late. There are many reasons they're late, but what positive reinforcement occurred when they were on time?

We all have experienced the pressure of meeting a deadline, and then not received feedback for doing so. Without the feedback (positive or negative), it's easy to think, "See, it wasn't important," or "It isn't noticed when I do get it in on time."

Another example is the struggle many sellers have balancing prospecting with service calls. Experience suggests service wins most often. The payoff or reward is the reason.

Service calls are almost certain to generate strokes, adulation and good feelings, which are positive and reinforce this activity.

On the other hand, prospecting is almost certain to generate some amount of negative feedback. To compensate, the manager (or some other system) must be in place to establish the desired actions with immediate rewards.

- Finally, avoid assuming money or any one thing will work for everyone. Sellers are usually very individualistic, so effective rewards and feedback will vary. Simply ask, observe or try different things until you hit the right tool.

Don't underestimate the value of personal strokes, recognition and appreciation.

Time, consistency and personal feedback can change sales behaviors, and these investments can pay off handsomely in sales, loyalty and competitive edge.

Garry Duncan is principal of Denver-based Leadership Connections, a sales training company. Reach him at 303-462-1277 or garry@leadershipconnections.com.

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