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## Fast-track training accelerates success, reduces collisions

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Corporate America's willingness to get back on a growth track after years of derailment is causing more owners and managers to add salespeople, and seasoned sellers to explore new opportunities. The time needed to train new hires sufficiently, however, is colliding head-on with managers saddled with other duties.

Adding to the challenge is the apparent existence of fewer qualified salespeople ready to step into a position and start selling immediately. Because seasoned people are at a premium, sales managers tend to jump when one is available, hoping their past industry experience will carry the new hire to success.

This can produce another fatal collision. Industry experience doesn't ensure success. Being appropriately goal-directed and able to self-manage and self-motivate are far better predictors of success.

As a result of this jumbled state of affairs, sales managers are looking longer and harder for less-experienced people who can grow into the job quickly. (Many large companies actually prefer inexperienced reps they can grow to their specifications.)

Hiring less-experienced people in a high-pressure-to-perform environment places added burdens on quick and effective training. But the people charged with conducting this training are being required to travel more, spend more time in the field, manage more accounts and accept a broader range of responsibility. They have less time to train. Without adequate management and support, the learning curve is lengthened, requiring even more time managers don't have.

This Catch-22 necessitates development of an efficient, fast-track, professional development plan that compresses the learning curve. (Even veteran sellers can benefit from a well-thought-out plan.)

Besides helping the trainees, it bolsters manager morale. As a past manager, I always felt the blood on my hands for those who didn't succeed, believing either I hired a weak fit or didn't provide the correct level of direction and feedback.

Following are key tips to creating a productive, fast-track training program:

- Hire well. No amount of training will fix a bad hire. Identify traits and competencies most important in your industry and company culture, then hire people possessing the most untrainable traits.

For example, ability to think through a complex problem is difficult to train, but most product knowledge can be acquired.

Hire the person with problem-solving skills but no product knowledge over one who knows the product intimately but can't problem-solve his or her way out of a paper bag.

Also look at personal motivations for the job, personal talents and behavior patterns that fit the culture and position.

- Provide a clear track. Building a strong team from inexperience requires defining specific weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual goals. Four general areas meriting constant attention and reinforcement are:

- a) Product and industry knowledge.
- b) Attitudes and values consistent with the organization and position.
- c) Skill set commensurate with the position.
- d) Performing the right activities to generate success.

A software sales manager scripted a fast start by giving his new salesperson five clear goals to accomplish by the end of each week, month, quarter and year. Each outcome was related to either product knowledge, activity, skill set or organization values and culture.

For example, during the first week, the trainee was to spend a half-day in each department, study two product manuals, obtain a potential customer list and identify the top five common benefits to product line customers.

In addition, this manager scheduled brief meetings with the trainee at the end of each week, month and so forth relative to the relevant goals. The trainee was held accountable for the plan, and the manager was empowered to coach and give feedback on progress in a clear and organized way.

- Delegate, delegate, delegate. Offload administrative tasks wherever possible; spend time setting goals and providing feedback on those goals. And get in the field as much as possible with newer people, who are more open to coaching earlier than later.

- Role play. Design sales meetings to take advantage of role-playing, drills for skill, and handling questions and objections. If your people can't do it in a role-playing environment, they can't do it in front of the customer.
- Stay in touch. Communicate with each rep at least once a week, even if by phone. Trainees need frequent reinforcement to know they and their goals are important to the organization's success.

Recognize that there are levels of skill, knowledge and activity that people migrate through. Help them plan so they can progress in a concise, clear way.

Properly designed fast-track training can get new people down the path quickly and productively, and help avoid the collisions that derail so many well-intentioned sales training programs.

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