



**RICHARDSON**  
THE POWER TO SELL

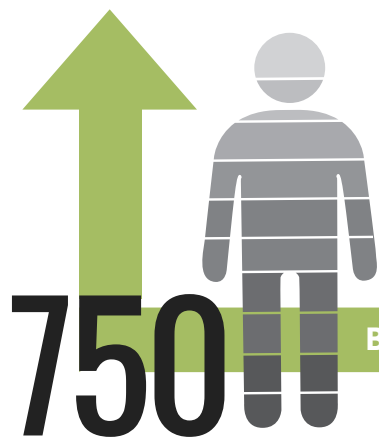


WHITE PAPER

# GREAT COACHING IS COUNTER-INTUITIVE

# EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Sales coaching is the key to sales success and improving the performance of the sales organization. It is the most important job a sales manager has. We examined why coaching is so difficult to master and what great coaching must look like to overcome the barriers. This paper is for sales and learning leaders who want to drive sustained performance and growth through a pervasive coaching culture.



Bersin and Associates Research



A survey of **750** corporations identified formal and established **coaching programs** as the **#1 factor** among the top 22 factors for driving business results.

**Seventy percent** of learning occurs through on-the-job coaching.



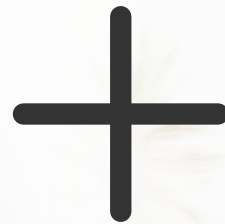
**I**t takes a certain kind of individual — and an even more unique one to be successful at it. Most sales managers know that they have to drive performance through their team if they are ever to have a shot at making their goal. A team goal simply can't be achieved by one single sales manager. Yet, we often see sales managers making Herculean efforts and resorting to hero tactics to win deals for their team members. Many times, they are putting in the longest hours — more than their direct reports. They put themselves in front of the customer when the stakes are high. They consistently have the monkey on their back.

If you ask a sales manager if coaching is an important aspect of their role, most are sure to agree that it is. It is difficult to find someone who disagrees with the value of coaching. However, in the fast-paced, modern sales environment, where almost everyone has more priorities, more initiatives, more customer issues, and more administrative work, "... it is easy for people to justify not making time for developmental activities." (Conger, 2013)

# WHY COACH?

## 1 ACCELERATE LEARNING

Regardless of whether you manage new sellers or seasoned veterans, the world is constantly changing. Customers are constantly changing. The competitive environment is constantly changing. Everyone needs ways to overcome challenges and reach success faster.



## ACHIEVE

## 2

### BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Trying new skills and strategies can feel uncomfortable and risky. It's easy to slip back into old habits quickly. To achieve permanent behavior change, team members need ongoing, consistent support and feedback.



## IMPROVE RESULTS

All businesses face pressure to increase goals and to achieve more with less. By accelerating learning and affecting permanent behavior change, you position your team members to achieve and exceed goals.

## 3

**Looking at these three reasons,** where do you think most managers tend to focus their efforts? Most managers tend to focus on the third point — results. They focus on the numbers. Here's where there needs to be a shift in mindset. Coaching is not about numbers. Coaching is about learning and behavior change. If you accelerate learning and affect permanent behavior change, the numbers will come. Numbers are indicators; they tell you where there is success or pain. By accelerating learning around success and pain points, and affecting behavior change, you position your team members to achieve and exceed goals.

# THE BARRIERS

So, if the path to sales success is driven through the team and coaching is so critical, then why is it so hard to build a sustained coaching culture? In our work with thousands of front-line sales managers, we have heard every reason — not enough time, too many competing priorities, lack of trust in the team, etc. And yet, when you peel those reasons away, the problem persists. To truly build a sustained and high-performance coaching culture, one must first understand the true barriers that prevent success.



# 1

## SALES MANAGERS OFTEN CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

Leading a sales team is about balancing the long- and short-term priorities to set the team up for sustained success. A sales manager needs a team of sellers who are accountable, engaged, and independent; and yet, building that kind of team means taking a strategic approach to high performance.

Most sales managers are primarily focused on numbers and often fall back to tactics and behaviors that might save the month but will prevent long-term, sustained growth. Focusing on learning and accelerating change through coaching will drive success, but it requires focus and discipline, which get tested and compromised under intense pressure.

Many managers think they are effectively coaching when in fact, they are not — they are directing, telling, and often doing the work themselves. Approaches to “coaching” fall on a continuum from directive coaching, where the coach serves as an expert, telling the team member what the problem is and what to do to fix it, to developmental coaching, where the coach serves as a resource and asks questions to help the team member self-discover and decide on the best action.

### The problem with telling and fixing is:

- It doesn't create buy-in for the solution.
- It takes ownership and accountability away from the team member and places it on the manager.
- It assumes that the manager knows what is best, which may or may not be the case.
- It doesn't give the manager insight into the team member's thinking, which is needed to appropriately offer guidance and insight.



- It can make the team member feel disrespected, which erodes trust.
- It can put the team member on the defensive.
- It doesn't help the team member to learn how to better problem solve for himself.
- It creates dependence on the manager rather than accelerating learning around how to independently prevent or fix issues in the future.
- It helps to solve an immediate problem, but doesn't build the team member's competence to become more independent in the long-run.

The manager gets stuck in a vicious cycle of doing the problem solving and fixing for the team member in order to achieve the numbers, rather than focusing on accelerating learning and affecting behavior change. Without a change in team member behavior, there typically is little to no lift in results for the whole team.

# 2

## OUR INNATE PROPENSITY TO “TELL”

Sales managers are used to telling, and the propensity to tell is very strong because: 1) having the right answer makes them feel like the hero, and naturally, being a hero feels good; and 2) it can seem quicker and easier to tell someone what to do rather than to collaboratively assess and help someone self-discover. To be motivated to change their behavior, many managers must recognize that telling does not change behavior or help people become more self-reliant.

Another important reason sales managers “tell” is the false belief that they must have all the answers. This occurrence is especially true for new managers or managers who are managing sellers who were peers. They rely on being the “fixer” to build credibility and strengthen their relationships with their teams. In truth, not only do managers not have to have the answers, the best ones rarely do! The best managers see it as their job to elicit and collaborate on answers. Their confidence is rooted in their approach versus someone who tells because of self-doubt.

Finally, even the best sales managers can fall victim to sellers on their teams who consciously or unconsciously encourage “telling.” In some cases, they are pressure testing a new manager, and in other cases, they are very adeptly transferring ownership of the issue to the manager rather than taking ownership and accountability for it themselves. Team members who lack confidence often crave the reassurance provided by the manager doing the fixing, which enables their being more dependent versus self-reliant.

## NATURAL DEFENSIVENESS

Most people don’t look forward to receiving negative feedback, and many people feel awkward giving it. Part of the challenge is the lack of skill in providing effective feedback and a lack of positive experiences in receiving feedback. Few of us can say that we have had exceptional coaches whose feedback we received openly.

The other part of the challenge can be found in brain science. Because our brains see criticism as a threat to our safety and survival, receiving feedback has both a physical and mental effect on us. Our heart begins pounding faster, and our throat becomes dry. Emotionally, we may begin to feel nervous, fearful, and defensive.

Cognitive dissonance is the mental stress that we feel when faced with information that conflicts with what we believe. Receiving “constructive” criticism can trigger cognitive dissonance. The natural reaction is to relieve the stress by defending our point of view or blaming the person giving feedback.

Negativity bias explains why unpleasant remarks and experiences stick with us much more than nice ones. Our brains process bad information more thoroughly than positive information. Over time, we build up a propensity to think the worst, which can put us on the defensive.

It’s no wonder we struggle to give and receive feedback. But feedback is an integral part of growth and the learning process. We all have blind spots and can benefit from an outside perspective to make adjustments and remove obstacles.

# 3

# 4

## DON'T KNOW WHAT GREAT COACHING LOOKS LIKE

**I**t is tough to do something when you have never seen it done well. It's even harder to do something well when we don't understand it or when we have a false understanding of what good looks like. Given that we have the natural propensity to tell and make short-term decisions based on revenue pressures, it's no wonder that there aren't a lot of truly great coaches running around. And because most managers have never seen coaching done well — many believe that they are actually practicing effective coaching — to them, fixing issues, answering questions, and giving advice is coaching.

# 6

## THE STRUGGLE FOR AUTHENTICITY

**M**any managers say they struggle to feel authentic when entering into coaching conversations. It is indeed hard to balance being a coach and ally while holding someone accountable for change and growth. Yet, it is actually authenticity and trust that preserve a relationship when there is conflict. In the long term, when we see our manager as someone who is direct, honest, fair, balanced, and specific, while maintaining a collaborative tone, we begin to trust. And when we trust, we become more open and more willing to not only try new things but also become more independent.

# 5

## LACK OF PRECISION

**T**here is no doubt that giving a piece of constructive feedback is challenging. Like any good diagnosis and prescription, the more specificity, the better. Yet, many managers are too vague or generic in their feedback. Perhaps they don't want to damage the relationship, or they fear the reaction, or maybe they are just looking to wrap up quickly. Have you ever given, or received, feedback that sounds like this: "Next time, you need to be more prepared."? That feedback lacks the clarity and specificity of exactly what the receiver should do differently the next time. Missing the opportunity to give precise feedback is like dropping the ball right before the goal.

# A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Making the transition to more effective coaching typically involves changing the conversation. It's not about having more conversations. It's about changing the dynamics of the conversation from telling and directing to collaborative problem solving, where you help team members self-assess and self-discover ways to leverage strengths and improve performance.



## EXCELLENCE IN DEVELOPMENTAL SALES COACHING — CORE TENETS

**Let's begin with the core tenets that underpin Richardson's sales coaching methodology:**

Salespeople should be involved and responsible for their own performance and development.

Every person has blind spots that cannot be seen clearly or completely. To see a full, sharp picture, everyone needs an outside perspective.

A successful coaching interaction opens perspective for both the salesperson and the sales manager.

The sales manager's role as coach is to be a thought partner and resource — to ask questions, listen, and learn — and to offer perspective with the goal of helping the team member gain insight and inspiration to grow and strengthen performance.

Trust is essential. While the focus of the conversation is on the business issues, the essence of a coaching interaction can be deeply personal and emotional. The salesperson must trust that the sales manager's intent is to help and support, not criticize, judge, or control.

A key opportunity for performance improvement lies in turning routine management inspections into coachable moments. Coachable moments exist everywhere in our daily interactions and routines. Taking advantage of planned and unplanned coachable moments is the cornerstone of a manager's success in creating an engaged team that meets and exceeds goals.

Learning is accelerated by continuously focusing on incremental growth. Focusing on one thing at a time allows coaching to happen in targeted, quick, efficient bursts.



## EXCELLENCE IN DEVELOPMENTAL SALES COACHING — GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The goal of developmental sales coaching is to create an environment where team members feel self-motivated to grow, excel, and take greater responsibility for what they do.

Ensure that the seller talks first, last, and most: Developmental sales coaching helps sellers move toward more self-motivated behavior because it meets our inherent psychological needs for:

**Autonomy:** Asking questions to help sellers self-assess and self-discover ways to improve performance gives team members a better sense of control versus telling them what to do.

**Relatedness:** Creating a safe, nonjudgmental environment to learn and grow builds trust and strengthens relationships.

**Competence:** Focusing on addressing performance needs helps the seller to feel mastery over their work environment and increases their confidence.

**Ask more than tell:** The heart of the coaching conversation lies in the manager's ability to engage in a collaborative process to help sellers self-assess and self-discover ways to leverage strengths and improve performance through effective problem solving. The benefits of coaching by asking are:

- Shows respect for the team member
- Opens conversations, which reveals more and better information for both the manager and seller to accurately diagnose needs

- Gives the manager a chance to identify gaps in their own thinking before giving feedback
- Shortens the coaching conversation by reducing defensiveness and getting to the underlying issue quickly
- Increases seller ownership of and buy-in to the solution
- Helps sellers become stronger problem solvers and more independent by using the process itself to self-coach
- Gives the manager insight into the seller's judgment, knowledge, and skill level
- Gives the manager a chance to find common ground, which helps to manage potential conflict
- Strengthens the relationship between manager and team member

Ensure the right issue gets solved. Diagnose before prescribing: Behind every performance gap lies an underlying root issue that is the true blocker to improved performance. Identifying and agreeing on the performance gap or opportunity is only the starting point. A manager must take the next step to identify the root issue that is preventing the desired behavior before identifying a solution. There is little value in taking action against the wrong problem.

If you would like to learn more about how to help your sales managers and leaders overcome barriers and develop into exceptional coaches who drive sustained performance, **click here** to get information on Richardson's Second Edition Developmental Sales Coaching Program and full sustainment solution.

Contact the Richardson Team at **215.940.9255**  
Visit us on the web at **[www.richardson.com](http://www.richardson.com)**



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