

Better Business Results Through Coaching

In today's business environment, on-the-job learning has become a major source for development and growth. Fostered by the pressure to continuously adapt, real-time learning with real tasks has been shown to provide the ideal environment for effective learning.

Managers are essential for on-the-job learning to occur. They frequently interact with their people, see how they accomplish their tasks and know what challenges they are facing. The way managers interact with their people, how much attention they give to them and the support, feedback and guidance they provide, are crucial competencies when it comes to developing people towards excellence.

More and more managers are integrating a coaching style in the way they interact with their people. Companies are very open to this approach but also want to know the impact it has on business results.

I headed a sales development program, run as a pilot in North America and Europe. It focused on enhancing negotiation effectiveness, mainly through managers applying a coaching approach with their account executives working on customer deals. The business impact we wanted to achieve was a reduced sales cycle time and an increased deal size. Business impact and the focus of the program were defined by sales executives.

Although every salesperson who participated in the pilot program had attended negotiation training classes in their careers, sales executives saw the need for a different approach to achieve excellence in customer negotiations. We designed a program that reflected business goals and integrated on-the-job learning. The components of the program included:

- A two-day coaching workshop for sales managers focusing on generic coaching skills and on coaching negotiation effectiveness
- Professional coaching for managers helping them apply a coaching style in their daily work and to foster their own growth
- Managers coaching their account executives on-the-job in customer negotiations

To support managers to coach their people on negotiation effectiveness, we developed a coaching tool. Adapted from the wheel of life, we designed a wheel of negotiation containing main areas of negotiation. The tool provided a structure and allowed for an individual approach. At the beginning of the program, account executives rated their negotiation skills and, together with their managers, defined the coaching focus and outcome of the coaching.

The impact of the program was evaluated three months later. Firstly, plans to evaluate the program on pre/post and control-group analysis had to be abandoned. Because of the continuous changes that are typical for global software companies, we

decided to conduct standardized, ample one-on-one interviews with sales managers and account executives who participated in the program.

Sales managers and account executives unanimously agreed that the program made a significant difference, as it already had an impact on their behavior and on business results. Coaching helped them not just jump to the next sales engagement but spend quality time together to generate new ideas, evaluate different approaches and, as a result, be better prepared and focused in customer negotiations. As a result, the business participants stated that the coaching helped them shorten the sales cycle, generate more opportunities and grow bigger deals. For example: during the pilot phase, a seven-figure deal, which was not identified as an opportunity at the beginning of the program, was close to being signed by the end of it. The overall results were tremendous compared to the program costs of \$60,000. Participants are highly motivated to continue applying a coaching style in their daily work. The results have been rolled out globally and additional programs have been conducted since then.

The biggest challenge for running this program had been to get the buy-in from sales executives that the time spent for the program will help their people achieve better results. We got the buy-in by offering a state-of-the-art people development program that focused on on-the-job learning, which was linked to business results and spoke the sales language. Another challenge was to ensure that the coaching was happening, especially in a hectic sales environment. We checked in with the participants on a regular basis and were available for questions.

Bringing coaching to the workplace through managers has a huge impact on what is possible. While developing people on-the-job, it produces better business results, creates an atmosphere of excitement, support and togetherness, and also provides meaning for the employees.

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