

# To Team or Not To Team?

Team is a word used extensively in the sales world. It is expected that every sales manager runs a sales team and many companies have 'teamwork' as one of their 'core' competencies. Yet, forging a 'true' team in sales is a real challenge for sales managers and becoming a 'true' team member for individual sales representatives is equally challenging. In this article, Team Performance Coach, Allan Mackintosh, looks at the challenges faced by both managers and representatives in the quest to ensure that their sales team is actually a team and not just a group of disparate individuals.

In the twenty-five years I have been working with and in sales 'teams' I can honestly say that very, very few have been real teams. In fact, the majority of them have actually just been a group of people brought together within an area to 'lump sum' their individual sales targets in an attempt to hit an area sales target. The fact is that if a manager can bring their sales representatives together and work as a team then the results can be far better for the team and for the individuals within that team.

I believe that there a number of reasons why it is challenging, (but certainly not impossible!) for sales teams to actually work effectively as a high performing team.

- The sales manager has not been given the correct training and coaching in how to bring a team together and support their development towards becoming a high performing team.
- The company has no real reward and recognition process that actually enables teams to form and individuals to work effectively within a team.
- The sales representatives are geographically spread and thus have little interaction with or apparent inter-dependence on, each other.

Let's look at each of these areas in turn and see what managers and representatives can do in order to develop their team:

**Training and Development.** I am constantly amazed that very little is done in the way of developing managers to effectively lead and develop their teams.

My experience has been that the majority of 'team leadership' development is done through perhaps a small module of an academic management development programme or through the odd conference session. There is also a mindset that says the best team-working is done in the bar! Believe me it isn't!

All managers should be trained effectively in how best to bring a team together and how they can move the team through the various development phases towards high performance. It is also important that this work is not just

purely theoretical classroom work and that there is a high proportion of practical and experiential work involved in any development courses.

In terms of the actual teams themselves, it is very effective to actually start to get teams to work together on experiential 'tasks' where a skilled coach can work with them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and with this knowledge support them to build a team development plan that they can implement in the workplace. The important thing about this work is that although there is a team development plan, there are also individual plans that each sales representative and manager has to commit to. Everything is related back to the workplace and so every team development day has a work focus as well as being a day of fun.

Without proper training and development, the group will simply be that – a group and a great chance to bring the talents of the group together to form a high performance team will be missed. The result will be continual frustration, everybody working as individuals, with potentially a large element of fun and satisfaction missing from the job.

**Reward and Recognition.** I remember in one company I worked for, the emphasis was on teams. Or at least the spoken work was! There was no training for the managers; senior management considered that team development happened naturally and was enhanced by excess alcohol at meetings; and that the best way to drive success was to create a league table of both teams and individuals. The individuals at the top of the league got praise and bonus; the middle of the table people, got a satisfactory rating and the people near the bottom got the 'big stick'. There was even an imaginary 'red line' between the bottom third and fourth person. This was the relegation area. Anyone below the 'red line' could expect disciplinary action. How motivational was this system? And how did this system support the development of high performance team working? It didn't! All it promoted was individuals working towards their own ends, keeping skills and information to themselves and ensuring a reluctance to support their fellow 'team' members.

There is definitely a move away from that sort of 'fear' culture although I sense that there is still a huge amount of individual reward and recognition within teams. It is my belief that managers should consider that bonus payments should be linked not just to individual performance but to the overall performance of the team. Just what the percentage split should be between individual reward and team reward depends on the type of team and the situation but the principle of team reward should always be in the mind of the manager. It has helped to a degree that many companies now have 'teamwork' as one of their core competencies and in order to demonstrate this competency, individual team members will have to demonstrate various positive team behaviours. The fact remains though that if competency measurement is held in very low measure relative to results measurement then it may not promote the desired team behaviours.

All managers, I believe, should consider some element of team as well as individual reward and this should really be impactful enough to make the individual team members think very careful about the impact of them not demonstrating the correct team-working behaviours.

**Geographical Separation.** The fact that the majority of sales teams are separated by geography does not help the process of becoming a team. However, there are numerous examples of high performing project teams across the world and many of these only come together via teleconferences and may never actually meet. Sales teams at least have the luxury of a regular monthly or quarterly meeting together with the odd conference. Every opportunity should be made of these 'physical' meetings to ensure sharing of learning and best practice. The manager should be creating meetings that allow this to happen and also allow time for the team members to support each other with challenges that they may be facing in their own territories. Similarly, support mechanisms should be put in place that allows team members to communicate regularly by phone and internet. And not just to allow 'moaning' sessions!

The manager also has a huge role to play in keeping the team together by keeping communication high and by regularly visiting the individual representatives in the field. This visit should not just be considered an 'assessment' visit of that individual by one which is used to share the learning that the manager has picked up from other representatives and ensuring that contact is made between the various representatives so that best practice is shared amongst them in a timely fashion and not just left to the next team meeting.

The manager is the catalyst in this, but individual representatives also have a responsibility to share success and highlight challenges. There has to be an environment created whereby everyone feels comfortable in communicating their success and 'flagging' up their challenges. The quicker success is communicated then the quicker it flows to others. The quicker challenges are shared and managed, the less the stress involved for everyone.

Sometimes it is easier to work as individuals in that there is no peer pressure but when you combine the skills, knowledge and positive attitudes of all the team members together then you can create a powerful and dynamic force that can deliver fantastic results. Without the right training and coaching, and without the right processes and reward systems, the group will always remain a group and never move towards becoming a high performance team.

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