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When Sales and Coaching Combine: An IBM Success Story

What started as a grass roots movement has evolved into a corporate transformation that is gaining momentum from the top down.

by Shelley Gaynes

There are 100 worldwide IBM coaches with extensive backgrounds in sales and marketing. It's their mission to embed a coaching behavior and approach throughout the sales ranks. Ingrained in their High Performance Selling Initiative is a coaching philosophy. Coaching at IBM is defined as

- A skill and an art requiring commitment and practice
- A relationship enabling people to unlock their potential
- A leadership style that pushes the boundaries to reach extraordinary results.

According to Cheryl Jensen, a certified co-active coach and manager in IBM's American Sales Transformation team, "We want to leverage the value of coaching throughout the sales organization. In teaching coach-like behavior to our sales leaders, territory managers, and executives, we help them reach their goals more effectively."

To provide real-world coaching scenarios to practice their skills, managers use Web conferences, case studies on the IBM Website, or interactive "coach simulators" to handle scenarios. Some examples of the coach simulators include

- how to dialogue with a new mobile employee who needs reassurance that he/she is doing the job properly and fitting in with the team
- how to have a difficult conversation with an employee who is not performing to expectations
- how to work with a new manager who seems overwhelmed and is using coercive behavior with his/her team.

To build support, the coaching approach is emphasized in the training environment at all times. For example, 20 sales managers in Washington, D.C., attended a performance appraisal system class at

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which coaching “sparklers” were sprinkled throughout the class. The sparkers ranged from listening skills, open-ended questions, the 80/20 rule, trust-building techniques, and the 7-second rule. During the course, the pervasive message of using coach-like behavior was encouraged. The managers were offered follow-up coaching in order to reinforce what was learned at the training session.

Tom Donahue, the east region vice president of sales in the distribution sector, is a strong proponent of this coaching transformation. “When I first started doing opportunity management system reviews with the cluster directors, they were mainly inspections. Now, I have a more collaborative approach with my directors. I ask more questions and do more listening rather than telling. It’s amazing the positive shift that subtle changes have had on the team. People come to the end point without being told. They do it on their own.”

Bottom line

How does IBM measure the effectiveness of the new sales coaching culture? Sara Smith, another IBM Sales transformation manager and coach, said, “A number of coached sales situations have landed significant deals. However, to attribute success to any singular factor, such as coaching, would probably not be accurate. We have a growing body of evidence that supports the value of integrating coach-like behavior into the sales process. We know that coaching has had a positive effect on the sellers, managers, and our IBM customers.”

IBM’s belief is that by teaching managers how to be more effective with their reps, the reps will be more effective with their customers. This is another way that IBM has differentiated their salesforce from the competition. “We leverage the value of coaching to get the right people in the right jobs and to be the best that they can be,” says Sara Smith.

With more and more companies including coaching as part of the sales managers’ responsibilities; it’s easy to see how IBM is a leader in this growing movement.

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