



Book

Proactive Sales Management

How to Lead, Motivate, and Stay ahead of the Game

William "Skip" Miller

[AMACOM](#), 2001

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Sales managers find, recruit, hire, lead and praise or fire salespeople and they sell an internal sales culture.

Recommendation

This book by William "Skip" Miller, a sales veteran and experienced trainer of sales managers, provides a wealth of information and guidance. Experienced sales managers will find it useful and new sales managers will find it indispensable. Miller covers cultural change, goal setting, recruitment, hiring, firing and more. He pays plenty of attention to day-to-day management, albeit in the context of his "ProActive" sales management program. Use this short, expansive manual as a handbook. For example, when you need to recruit, hire or terminate someone, consult the appropriate chapter. The book is easy to read and full of common sense. *getAbstract* recommends it highly to its target audience: sales managers.

In this summary, you will learn

- How to create a sales-oriented culture as a sales manager
- How to set measurable sales goals
- How to recruit, hire and fire salespeople

Take-Aways

- Sales managers need different skills than salespeople.
- Sales managers often waste too much time helping under performers. Spend your time more productively supporting ace performers.
- Culture is one of the most powerful elements in your sales organization.
- People tend to deliver the performance you expect them to deliver.
- You will get the behavior you measure, so select metrics for the behavior you want.
- "ProActive" sales managers focus on the future, not the past.
- When seeking new salespeople, ask your best performers to recommend people they know. Then ask your other salespeople and then ask your employees at large.
- When interviewing candidates, be careful. The wrong kind of question could embroil you in a lawsuit.
- If you have to fire someone, do it fast. Comply with all the legal niceties, but get it done.

- Have the discipline to change yourself and your culture.

Summary

The New Sales Manager

The sales manager's job is to lead. People often rise to the rank of sales manager from a successful career in sales. But the skills required to sell are very different from the skills required to be a leader and manage a sales force. A few of the differences are:

“Salespeople must be customer-focused, and sales managers must be people-focused.”

- Salespeople have a customer focus; sales managers have a company focus.
- Salespeople are independent individuals who often love the spotlight; sales managers must work through others and stay in the background.
- Salespeople are talkers; sales managers are listeners.
- Salespeople take direction; sales managers give direction.

The sales manager's job is to help the salespeople focus on their jobs. Your most important skills are people skills. Moreover, successful sales managers look to the future, not the past. They view every issue from several perspectives and set quantifiable objectives with the agreement of their salespeople. Most importantly, sales managers must exemplify and transmit a culture of selling, as reflected in their department's values and expectations.

Creating a Sales Culture

Culture is a powerful if intangible force. The expectations a culture creates are a big part of its personality and influence. Psychological research demonstrates that people very often do precisely what you expect. That is, people who are expected to fail, and who know they are expected to fail, come to expect themselves to fail and they fail. People who are expected to succeed and who feel that expectation, come to expect success of themselves and succeed. Managers send messages, not necessarily in words, but certainly in body language, tone of voice and attention given or denied. Your sales force receives these messages unambiguously.

“A successful joint sales call is like a play whose roles are carried out according to a prearranged script.”

Research shows that when poor performers outdo themselves and start to perform at a stellar level, their managers often react badly. Why? Having formed a certain expectation, the managers face the difficult task of adjusting to the new reality. No one likes change. It is easier, though much less productive, to treat poor performers' excellence as a temporary anomaly, and put them back in their place. Usually sales managers are not even aware when they are doing this. Become aware. Because culture is so important, you should:

“Highly competent sales managers have the ability to spend their limited resource on the ... situation that needs to be addressed.”

- Examine your organization's culture. Put its most important principles in writing.
- Examine the culture of your sales unit.
- Write a vision of the culture you would like in your unit a year from today.
- Think of today as the future. What is different from where you were when you wrote your vision?
- Imagine what you did to establish this change. Since it is easier to look backward than to peer into the future, this exercise allows you to treat foresight as hindsight.
- Now write the action steps you imagine you must have taken to shape the future to fit your vision. These action steps are your plan for the work of cultural change.

Managing Time, Managing People

The three most challenging tasks for nearly all sales managers are managing time, managing people and setting measurable objectives. These issues are closely related.

“In a reactive world, sales managers are spending much of their time trying to do what they can to make the numbers.”

To manage your time more effectively, spend your first hour at work alone. Don't check e-mail, talk on the phone or react to the demands of others. Take command of your day and set your own agenda. Write your objectives for the day and then pursue them.

Sales managers spend far too much time working with their least valuable, least productive salespeople. Stellar performers tend to accomplish a lot individually, and don't ask for much backup. Often, the B and C-level players are the ones who have problems or issues, or need help. Ironically, the sales manager could be much more effective supporting the most productive A-level people.

Prove this to yourself by charting your salespeople's names, quotas and performance. Show the difference between performance and quota in the last column. Probably, you will find that the best salespeople are above quota and the worst are below it. You will get more impact for your time if you help overachievers do even more than if you try to boost underachievers to the minimum level.

“Prioritize and march to your own drum the first thing every morning. That's right. Spend the first hour of every day marching to your agenda, and not someone else's.”

The "ProActive" sales manager disengages from C people by teaching them to do the job themselves. Remember the proverb, "Give a man a fish, and he eats for the day; teach him to fish and he eats for his whole life." The "ProActive" sales manager makes sure that the C players don't slow the sales operation, which must run at A speed, not C speed. Top salespeople get fed up with anything less than the best management. They don't like to be second or third best, or to be associated with mediocrity.

Sales Goals as a Tool

Set measurable, useful sales department objectives. Forward-looking measures are best. Don't use revenue as your metric, because you can't change revenue. Instead, measure:

- Frequencies - Measure how many sales calls, calls on major accounts, proposals, executive sales calls and demonstrations salespeople book. Make a list of the frequencies they must achieve to generate the results you want, based on your understanding of, for instance, how many calls it takes to get a sale.
- Skills - This includes communication skills, negotiating skills, time management skills, customer knowledge skills and others. Your sales force needs certain skills to get results. Decide what each member needs and measure each one's progress.

“The 3 to 1 rule tells you to try to catch your salespeople doing something right three times as often as you criticize them for something wrong.”

You get what you measure. Measure skills and frequency, and you'll get both. Link the right skills with the right frequency and you'll get revenue as a byproduct.

Building the Team

You need the right people, so you must recruit and interview. In the U.S., remember that the law does not allow you to ask potentially discriminatory questions. In employment decisions, you may not consider race, gender, age, religion, national origin, physical disabilities that are not relevant to job performance, arrest records, credit ratings, marital status or whether the person is a veteran. Don't ask about these factors or discuss them during an interview, in writing or any other way. If you do, you may find it hard to demonstrate that you did not discriminate. In this realm, you are guilty until you prove yourself innocent.

“The golden rule for hiring candidates is to

be ProActive and always look. Always look to strengthen your bench."

"Try to interview in the morning and interview as early in the week as possible. The pressures of the day seem to mount in the afternoon and later in the week."

"Have two sources do reference checks ... Too many managers have treated a reference check lightly, hearing only what they want to hear, not what really is being said."

"It is always good to change one's perspective in the corrective action process."

Begin your search for the right person by examining your organizational and sales force culture. What do you want that culture to become? What competencies are you trying to hire? What does your organization need? Put everything in writing and then begin your search. You must search proactively. The best sources of good people are:

- Your best people - Ask your sales force to help you with personal leads. You could even ask them to sound out customers about good people they know.
- Inside your company - Ask non-sales force employees for leads. Offer bonuses and incentives. Put a big TV in the lobby with a sign that says it belongs to the person who brings in the salesperson you need. Advertise inside the company. Put up posters that read, "Sales star wanted." Include tear-off tags with your phone number, like the posters people put up when they are trying to find lost pets.
- Outside the company - Make professional, discreet overtures. Make the most of online job search sites. Use job fairs, company open houses and the like.
- Recruiters - Use these services cautiously and after investigation. You will be allowing them to represent you to people you want and you must not be misrepresented.
- Advertise publicly as a last resort - Write your ad from the perspective of the candidate. Convince the best people to contact you. Don't blow your own horn.

As you embark on the interview process, waste as little time as possible with mediocre or unsuitable candidates, but treat them courteously and professionally. Invest most of your time in excellent candidates, without tipping the playing field so far in their favor that it puts you at a negotiating disadvantage later. Approach the interview process in three stages:

1. See as many people as you can in a first round of interviews. Make the setting relaxed, natural and reasonably public (never interview in a hotel room). After this round, decide which candidates are the best. You'll probably have two or three.
2. Arrange for others in the organization to interview your top candidates. Tell the interviewers what you are seeking and what you would like them to focus on.
3. Once you identify your top candidate, arrange for your salespeople or others in the firm to have a lunch or some other off-site session with him or her to get a sense of the cultural fit.

Don't think of the interview as an interview. Think of it as a sales call. Use your best people skills and communication techniques to read the candidate as you would a customer. Stay in control, unless the candidate is effective enough to take control by applying superior skills. That, by the way, is a very good sign. Look for a sales candidate who practices the flip, turning your question around on you. Look for someone who probes for the real reasons behind your initially stated reasons. Look for a candidate who knows how to close.

Carefully check references. In fact, have two people check references, one of whom should not be involved in sales. It helps to have another set of eyes looking at references.

Discipline and Correction

Correction is necessary when you are dealing with ethical violations and poor performance or in cases where retraining would cost more than hiring.

As the last implies, the corrective process is a final chance. You are putting the employee on notice that he or she faces only two alternatives: change or terminate. Do be considerate. Do empathize. Do understand that the employee is probably emotional and under stress. But do what you have to do. That also means complying carefully with all the laws governing dismissal. Consult your company's lawyers to be sure. Give the employee a written warning. Use measurements and data to support your judgment. Provide counseling. Give a final warning in writing. Then fire the underperformer. When you fire someone:

"The idea of rewards can be a costly investment if not done right."

- Use a room that is not your office - You can't leave your office. You want to be in control of how long you stay. Use your judgment about firing by phone or in person.
- Don't waste time - Fire the employee as soon as you walk in the door. Say, "The reason I am here right now is to inform you that this is your last day of employment with this company."
- Don't take any risks - Fired employees might get violent toward you or toward themselves.
- Never fire someone on Friday if you can help it - The employee can't call recruiters or other companies on Saturday. The only thing the employee can do is muse about you, about how you just fired him or her, and how unfair you are, after all he or she has given. If you fire people on Tuesday or Wednesday, they can make some calls and start to think of alternative opportunities.
- Know when to leave - If the employee mentions contacting a lawyer, stop talking and leave the room. You'll want your own lawyers to handle anything with legal implications.

"Great leaders are great communicators."

There's the door - Get the fired person out of the building immediately, if not sooner.

About the Author

William "Skip" Miller is president of M3 Learning, a ProActive sales and sales management company, and founder of The Advanced Sales School.

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