

RECRUIT AND DEVELOP SALES CHAMPIONS: TOP GRADING YOUR SALES FORCE

Some relatively new terms are floating around sales performance circles. One is 'top grading' and the other is 'spot-removing.'

In order to shed some light on their relevance and significance, I'll break them both down in separate Insights. This Insight focuses on 'top grading,' which is a term normally applied to an organization's sales force.

Top grading serves to connect an organization with high performing sales people, and then develop them, as they are the ones who keep moving those performance bars higher.

What business wouldn't want to recruit, hire and train top-tier talent for its sales teams? Of course, top grading your sales force is important during all business cycles. But, especially in this down economy, we all greatly appreciate those high performers who can and do make all the difference. All organizations need world-class sales performers, particularly now.

We can also greatly appreciate that a sales position is the single most difficult position within any organization. Also, in terms of succession planning and building out your sales teams, you want the highest possible performing team in place.

So how do you go about figuring that out? First, you have got to get some 'A' sales players, and then you will always have your 'Bs.' Given that, you need a process and a plan to get those people moving forward. You want your 'As' to move forward to 'A+' positions; and you want your 'Bs' to move forward to those 'B+' positions; and you want the 'B+s' to move to the 'A' positions, and so on.

Not only that, you will find that your 'A+s' are the ones who will attract other high achievers, and they will also help you manage peers and help you avoid hiring the 'C' players, who most likely will not become high performers.

That's it. The above represents your classic model. It actually hasn't changed much in 40 to 50 years. But now it's got that label, 'top grading.' Businesses have always looked at their sales force planning processes that way, but they may not have consciously realized it, as they do today.

Again, this strategy represents a very critical one, especially during this very down economy period. As you can understand, organizations cannot afford to make even one poor hiring decision. You could, literally, be one hire away from pulling your organization way ahead of a tidal wave or the chopping block. These days, something can happen that was not anticipated, and most organizations cannot afford to just turn over people, mostly because they don't have the safety net anymore.

Businesses expect a certain and acceptable rate of turnover within a sales force. The entire process is extremely difficult, and not everyone is cut out for those types of positions that are constantly driving sales and revenues. You have your great hires and, then again, you have some sales people who can slow down everything that you have worked hard to achieve.

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So your objective with top grading is to fine-tune the recruiting/hiring process so that:

1. You are only hiring top performers for your sales force;
2. You are not hiring poor performers; and
3. You know how to quickly weed out poor performers before they do any damage.

As a closing note for this Insight, I want to add that it's not always about hiring the wrong person. It's interesting, too, as admittedly I've even fallen into this trap myself. You successfully coach and develop (with some possible mentoring, as well) a sales person to that 'A' performance level. And, ideally, this is the result you're looking for with a top grading approach.

Next, however, we can all have a tendency to move into what I describe as the "player-coach syndrome." This happens when you take your best player and you start rationalizing that he/she, too, would be a great coach.

So, guess what can happen next? You took a 'C' player and top graded him/her to a level 'A' player; then you put this individual into a management role, which all too often can end up to be a failing arrangement for everyone. As you can see, then, faulty thinking can cause poor decisions to be made, which can end up with people failing at many levels. And no one, especially a formerly top performing sales person, wants to admit failure.

Unfortunately, I see the above play out almost more than a poor hiring decision, so perhaps you can take some valuable lessons from the field with this example!