

A close-up photograph of a chessboard. A hand is moving a gold king piece. To the left is a silver king piece. Other gold pieces are visible in the background. The image is used as a background for the text.

CLOSING CRUCIAL LEADERSHIP GAPS



1. Supporting Sales Managers Who Are Feeling Squeezed

Today's sales managers are dealing with a lot: the economic downturn, accelerated digital transformation, intensifying talent wars, changing employee expectations, the need to do more with less, and the list goes on. In light of these challenges, the workplace can be even more troublesome for sales managers who are in these leadership roles without support. They are left to figure out the nuances of effective leadership on their own while being squeezed from all directions.

This creates a leadership gap—between the skills they have and the skills they need—that has consequences for employees at all levels as well as the organizations they support. Leadership coaching is a proven way to help sales managers develop the skills they need to bridge this gap and become effective leaders who can navigate the complex challenges of today's workplace with confidence and competence.

Find a Leadership Style That Fits:

Helping sales managers to transition effectively into their role as people managers requires guidance to ensure they can see and embrace the big picture, how their role helps to shape it, and the myriad pieces therein. This transformation likely won't happen overnight, but sales managers can accelerate this process by:

- Developing an effective leadership style
- Learning how to delegate

The capabilities and behaviors needed to become an effective sales manager can be learned, which is why dedicated development is so beneficial. For instance, without support, determining their leadership style can be challenging, but it's something sales managers need to do in a way that reflects their personality.

Each leader has strengths and weaknesses, and their leadership style should promote the former, minimize the latter, and match the leader's abilities. Otherwise, the sales manager role will feel like putting on a set of ill-fitting clothes. Leadership development tools like 1:1 coaching can then address weaknesses that might inhibit effective performance, collaboration, or team communication.

Creating a leadership style isn't about just choosing a managerial identity or imitating a style admired in previous managers. Although this tactic might prove effective, it can be problematic if that style doesn't match a sales manager's inherent traits and characteristics.

In their 2020 Harvard Business Review article, "How to Develop Your Leadership Style", Suzanne J. Peterson, Robin Abramson, and R.K. Stutman wrote that "a great leadership style can make people appear more competent than they truly are, and a poor style can drag down a superior skill set."

Meaning, that sales managers shouldn't try to be strict disciplinarians if their personality is warm and personable. Nor should they try to be a transformational leader if that doesn't play to their skill sets. Instead, it's more comfortable and more effective if the individual works to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and values. This requires self-reflection and keeping two things in mind:

1. A leader's style should be flexible and promote the idea of asking for help.
2. Consistency when applying a leadership style builds organizational stability.

Being authentic is also important to build trust with direct reports because it helps them to learn who their leader is and what to expect. If sales managers are to encourage their teams to complete their best work, they need to build trust and leverage a strong understanding of interpersonal dynamics. To accomplish this and produce strong business outcomes over time, sales managers need to:

- Demonstrate interest in employees' input and expertise.
- Find ways to let employees know they value their contributions.
- Show vulnerability about their capabilities to strengthen workplace bonds.

Sales managers also need to understand that their roles come with an inherent power dynamic and neglecting it entirely can be problematic. For example, some sales managers try to maintain the same relationships with peers they had before they were promoted. While leaders should be sociable, they must understand the new responsibilities and expectations placed upon them once they step into a managerial role.

These and other kinds of relationship complexities that sales managers face emphasize the significance of building strong, dynamic leadership skills. When sales managers can shift their mindsets, few challenges are insurmountable. However, they must remain open to growth to effectively take on the responsibilities of the role.

It's also important for sales managers to factor in the broader scope of their responsibilities beyond just their direct team. By keeping a firm eye on organizational goals, sales managers can become more effective in leading their team—and themselves—towards greater success.

Tip: Want to develop an effective leadership style? A good place to start is by reading the HBR article ["What Leadership Style Do You Major In?"](#).

Transition From Doing-It-All to Delegating:

A sales manager's biggest challenge may be recognizing that they no longer have to do all the work themselves. Delegation is a surprisingly multifaceted skill, yet many sales managers downplay it. When viewed objectively, delegation is a process with several moving parts. When struggling to delegate, leaders can take these steps to assign tasks successfully:

- Divide the overarching goal into specific tasks.
- Assess team capabilities to delegate tasks effectively.
- Communicate delegated tasks and deadlines clearly and concisely.
- Provide appropriate feedback after evaluating the outcome of each task.

Sales managers who were once high-performing individual contributors may default to completing tasks themselves, believing it's quicker. In reality, they end up overworked with an underutilized and unmotivated team. To be effective leaders, they must acquire the leadership capabilities necessary to level up their soft skills, which is crucial for effective delegation, and coaching is a proven way to acquire these capabilities.

Tip: Want to delegate more skillfully? A good place to start is by reading the HBR article ["To Be a Great Leader, You Have to Delegate Well"](#).



2. Top Capabilities for Sales Managers

Shifting demographics in virtual and hybrid workplaces, changing cultural norms, and increasing reliance on digital workplace technologies have changed how managers and employees interact. The importance of soft skills cannot be underestimated.

In fact, since the pandemic, companies are increasingly prioritizing social, emotional, and advanced cognitive skills and capabilities, according to a 2021 McKinsey survey shared in their article “Building workforce skills at scale to thrive during and after the COVID-19 crisis.” These skills include leadership and managing others, interpersonal skills and empathy, adaptability and continuous learning, and critical thinking and decision-making.

While communication, adaptation, and teamwork have always been crucial soft skills for managers in any industry to succeed, global events and the speed of change in an increasingly digital world have accelerated demand. Leadership coaching is a proven way to acquire, develop, and accelerate the use of the soft skills that will better position sales managers to face the diverse challenges they’ll encounter on the job.

Tip: Want to effectively lead and manage your team? A good place to start is by reading the HBR article “5 Pieces of Advice for First-Time Managers”.

3. Three Mindset Shifts Sales Managers Need to Make

Excelling in a managerial position requires a shift in mindset. Sales managers could think of it as teaching someone how to drive instead of being a student driver. The student driver may have spent years as a passenger, watching others navigate long distances effortlessly, and believing that driving isn't difficult. They might have read every training manual and feel prepared for any situation. However, that confidence often changes the instant they merge onto a busy highway, and that familiar car suddenly feels different from anything they had imagined.

Sales managers who previously stood out as motivated self-starters with demonstrated individual achievements must now shift their attention toward their team's performance and how to help them succeed. To make this shift successfully requires time, self-reflection, patience, mentoring, and coaching.

I frequently work with clients entering management roles for the first time. If there's one thing, they can all agree on, leadership differs from what they imagined as employees. Reading books or googling doesn't sufficiently prepare someone for a new leadership role. The following three specific mindset shifts are necessary to enable sales managers to tackle managerial challenges effectively and avoid counterproductive old habits:

From Individual Contributor to Leader:

If someone was a high-performing sales rep and then suddenly, without time to prepare, they're promoted to sales manager and asked to lead, strategize, and delegate tasks, it could be a problematic transition. Most of their prior experiences are rooted in individual hands-on contributions. As a result, many sales managers shift back to doing the day-to-day hands-on work because it feels simpler; they already know how to contribute as an individual.

While this is understandable, sales managers must deploy a greater sense of self-awareness, and immediately make a mindset switch because now their

success is based on team contributions, not personal accomplishments. Their role involves hiring capable employees, delegating tasks, and providing resources to help their team work as effectively as possible.

A sales manager's past expertise is best utilized as it relates to measuring a team's success—not by completing tasks themselves; otherwise, they could end up overwhelmed managing two full-time jobs at once. Eventually, they may find they can't fulfill either role effectively. A better approach is to practice delegation daily. This helps leverage the abilities of every team member to complete tasks successfully. Effective delegation is a skill that takes time to learn and ensures the right people are working on assignments that fit their knowledge and skill sets. It frees a sales manager's time to focus on higher-level tasks that help the company grow and succeed.

From a Focus on Daily Goals to a Strategic Perspective:

Some stereotypes allude to sales managers not taking on “real work” compared to ground-level employees. The truth is, leaders still work—it's just rooted in high-level strategy. Sales Managers are responsible for generating and implementing directives that benefit the entire organization, which requires strategic thinking beyond immediate tasks.

Strategic thinking works the same way as planning a long car trip on a Global Positioning System (GPS). You enter the destination—or in business strategy, a high-level goal—into the system, and it generates a list of routes, factoring in distance and traffic congestion—high-level strategies. Once the route is determined, the driver focuses on a short-term destination, which is the journey's first step, or to continue our business analogy, a more immediate outcome.

A driver who plans each stop before picking a final destination is unlikely to reach their goal. This is the same concept for sales managers. Goals and strategies are set first before employees can execute immediate plans to reach

small tasks and larger goals. Often, sales managers who focus on daily tasks struggle with strategic thinking, but making a shift in mindset helps them lead their teams and the business more effectively. Coaching is an excellent way to promote this kind of real-time development using the sales manager's actual work as the appropriate framework for learning.

From a Near Exclusive Self-Focus to a Team-Focus:

Whether a team is composed of hundreds of employees or just a few, all managers represent the organization's public face. They are the figures who will be recognized for the brand's success and associated with its failures. This image of one manager determining a company's future is seldom accurate—businesses often succeed or fail as a team. But this story of one leader taking a company to the pinnacle of success is so compelling that it's not uncommon for some leaders to believe it.

Top sales managers are successful because they often attribute their achievements to their teams. Rarely do they say it's because of their individual skills or attributes. However, self-focus is about more than just a leader's overconfidence. Sometimes it's the opposite; sales managers assume too much responsibility for incidents beyond their control and attach the company's successes and failures to their actions. This can appear as though their ego is at the center of all activities.

It's essential for sales managers to develop a team-focused mindset. However, it's easy for them to forget this because much of the language they use daily is rooted in themselves, making it easy to slip out of a team mentality. They must develop the habit of making every communication—even casual conversations—about the team instead of themselves.

Making these mindset shifts is just the first of many steps in any sales manager's leadership development process. Mastering these steps helps these individuals learn to delegate, motivate employees, create high-performing

teams, and much more. As with any habit, changing these mindsets isn't easy. It requires time, practice, and guidance for sales managers to develop these three mindsets that will effectively support and develop others on their team. However, when combined with the right soft skills, they can become confident leaders while building and managing highly effective teams.

4. Two Things Every Sales Manager Needs to Master

When sales managers develop the right mindset, they can lead with intention; but more is needed. Sales managers may continue to feel overwhelmed about leading a team—and for a good reason! Managing people is a skill that needs to be purposefully developed. One of the most critical reasons for this is that effective team management involves understanding diverse personalities.

Talent retention has become a big concern for many organizations amid workforce mobility patterns like the Great Resignation, and it's rooted in employees' feeling like they don't belong. It's created a crisis that sales managers must address. Adopting the following strategies can develop the capabilities that can reduce team stressors and increase talent retention:

1. Improve Communication

Strong communication skills will make or break any sales manager. Why? How they work influences other people on their team—and the organization as a whole—so having open lines of communication and clearly understanding their peers, direct reports, and senior leaders is key to establishing themselves as strong leaders.

Organizations are composed of individuals with varying skills and experiences. Sales managers must demonstrate soft skills like empathy and communication to ensure their employees feel seen and heard and feel comfortable asking questions and contributing their ideas. Especially during times of change and business disruption—which are more common these days than not—employees must feel that their needs are a priority. If a sales manager's communication

skills need work, or they're unsure how to communicate empathetically, coaching can provide them with the support they need to become effective communicators.

2. Create a Supportive Work Structure

Setting up a framework or workflow process early on will pay off when work becomes demanding. To help with this, here are some ways sales managers can build a more supportive work structure:

Connect with other sales managers: One common mistake sales managers make is to solely focus on their immediate team. They may need guidance on how to expand their network and invite their peers to participate in conversations about mutual support within their roles.

Develop crucial leadership skills immediately: Sales managers should identify their strengths and areas of weakness to see where improvements are needed. If they're unsure, they can and should ask for feedback from their manager or enlist the help of a leadership coach. Working directly with a leadership coach can provide a much-needed external perspective to guide new skill-building, and help sales managers measure and report their growth along the way.

Encouraging sales managers to ask for feedback will make them more effective. Keeping the lines of communication open, checking in frequently with people they work closely with, and actively working to create an inclusive culture helps to increase trust and engagement and fosters a culture of belonging. All of these are vital for their effectiveness.

**High-performing teams don't just happen;
they are intentionally created.**

-Sascha Heinemann-



5. From Inexperienced Manager to Effective Leader

Once sales managers have successfully identified their leadership style, understand the role they are in, and consistently delegate tasks, they need to start the more nuanced work needed to become truly effective in their role. Achieving this will take deliberate effort, and sales managers may need support to execute the following three steps.

1. Block Off Time to Reflect and Plan

Effective management is more or less a continual data-gathering and analysis process. As they move through different projects, sales managers need regular time to reflect on their wins, challenges, strengths, areas of weakness, and what capabilities they may need to develop in order to lead their teams better.

2. Engage in Conversations with Senior Leaders About Expectations

All sales managers and their direct reports need to know what is expected of them at work, but it can particularly impact how well sales managers execute their responsibilities. Gaps between expectations and effectiveness often occur when there is a lack of clear, consistent communication between senior leaders and their managers.

3. Set Clear Expectations with Team Members

Often, these conversations are the most difficult for sales managers, especially if they are leading a team of former peers. It's important for them to put themselves in their team members' shoes and think back to how they felt when they may have had a new sales manager. They likely worried about the same things. Although they may have already worked together, those individuals may be curious about how things might change now that their peer is the leader. It's essential that sales managers take the time to listen to their team, encourage them to share their worries or fears, and ask them what their expectations, goals, and ideas are.

Following these practices is part of a fundamental, broader mindset shift that sales managers must make to achieve success in their role. The idea is for these valuable talents to look beyond their immediate role and understand how their work impacts the organization as a whole. By developing a broader company view, they're priming themselves to become more strategic and effective leaders.

7 Questions Every Sales Manager Needs to Answer:

- What is my unique leadership style?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- Do I know what success looks like for my role?
- What resources do I need to succeed as a manager?
- Does my team know what success looks like for their role?
- What tasks can I delegate and to whom should I delegate them?
- What are the strengths and development areas of my team members?

**Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself.
When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.**

-Jack Welch-

Let's Stay In Touch...



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THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!