

Move Them Up or Move Them Out

Working with resistant reps

It's the end of the year and as a sales manager or executive, you've got lots on your mind besides holiday shopping and parties. Your sales team is putting on the fourth-quarter press to make their year-end numbers and you're busy thinking about how to start the new year strong. If you're like many leaders, you're concerned about how you're going to jump-start your middle and poor performers. Let's face it – much of your success is tied to your ability to develop your team members' skills to move them up the performance ladder. Imagine the improvement in your results if you could develop your "C" players into "B" players, and "B" players into "A" players. Any sales manager worth her salt takes pride in continuously improving the performance of every member on her team. However, not every member on your sales team is going flawlessly execute every coaching tip and recommendation you offer. In fact, it's safe to say that you'll work with some team members who are resistant and even outright antagonistic about performance improvement. So, what do you do about it?

At OutSell, we deal with this challenge every day. We help our clients generate outstanding sales performance through better execution of the fundamentals that drive results. The sales managers and executives we work with set the expectation that these fundamentals will be adopted by the entire sales organization. Of course, not everyone has the skills or desire to comply and the manager or executive works with these team members toward the desired behaviors. Our experience tells us we have two options in these situations – we need to help move these resistant reps up the performance ladder quickly or help move them off the team. The preferable option is to move them up by improving their behaviors and habits through a series of regularly scheduled 1-on-1 coaching interactions that:

- Set performance goals.
- Identify areas of opportunity and growth..
- Allow the manager to transfer the necessary skills needed for success
- Generate action plans that build skills and enable the resistant rep to overcome the areas of opportunity and achieve the performance goals.
- Set a schedule for follow up where the manager or executive provides feedback on the execution of the action plan and progress toward the performance goals.

We have found that most team members, especially middle and poor performers, respond very well to individualized coaching. However, it is not unusual for a team member to resist coaching for many reasons, including:

- He feels you haven't earned the right to coach him.
- She isn't convinced you have her best interest at heart.
- He believes your processes are not as effective as the processes he's currently using.
- She isn't open to growth and change because she doesn't like to leave her comfort zone.
- He has an attitude problem.

It is important to have a strong backbone when working with a resistant team – don't try to avoid contact, even though it's a whole lot easier. In fact, it's much more effective to engage the resistor by doing the following:

- Talk about the issues openly and privately with the team member.
- Continue to articulate your expectations.
- Help him understand that you're training him in the behaviors and processes of top performers in the company.
- Work on establishing rapport by identifying her wants, interests and goals, and showing how the processes support them.
- Help him take small steps and reward small performance gains.
- Let her know that you genuinely want her to succeed.

Sometimes, resistant reps end up being some of the most effective team members (and sometimes they don't). It's important to identify uncooperative people early, and not spend too much time trying to turn them around. At OutSell we have a saying, "Uno, Dos, Adios." As a manager you need to put in the necessary effort to move them up, but you also need to know when to cut your losses and move on. After all, your time is better spent moving them out if they don't want to move up. If one of your team members hasn't met goals three months in a row and resists coaching, you might want to start a conversation with:

John, I've been looking at our team and individual sales results. And for the past 3 months you and I have been talking about your performance and how to improve it. We've laid out action plans and had extra coaching sessions. I really want you to succeed here, but when I checked our sales results for the month you fell under 70% of goal again. If you are going to continue to work on our team you're going to need to improve your results. Let's talk about why this is happening, and how you can improve. By the way, I'm going to recap our meeting and I'm going to ask you to recap it too, so we have a clear understanding that we want you to succeed, but we're not going to put up with this poor performance indefinitely."

Companies have policies and disciplinary processes in place for chronic poor performers and resistant reps, and you should follow them to the letter. The key to working with these team members is to keep putting the truth in front of them. Keep telling them the truth. Keep writing them the truth. Keep presenting them with the truth so they can see what they're doing that's not working. Don't sugar coat it and don't make it worse than it actually is. Moving them up is a challenge, but it's a challenge every effective manager has to overcome.