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CHUCK TALK: How not to manage America's 14 million salespeople BY CHUCK MACHE

People may debate the nature and extent of climate change on Planet Earth, but no one can deny the global economic climate has dramatically changed in the past decade.

The world is vastly more competitive, with an estimated 14 million salespeople in the United States vying for fewer pieces of a shrinking pie. Long-standing corporate formulas for success are falling by the wayside daily as today's companies experiment with innovative new strategies to get to the top and stay there.

How have these economic changes affected sales organizations? For starters, a company's best sales reps are relentlessly being wooed by the competition, often successfully. The turmoil created by increased sales staff turnover is tremendously costly in hiring and training costs, not to mention the human stress it creates in managers and sales reps alike. This atmosphere of chronic unease, suspicion and anxiety is counterproductive to the teamwork required in a high-performing sales department, but, sadly, it's the norm in many companies today.

This situation is made worse by managerial downsizing. Today's sales managers are stretched to an extraordinary extent. Expected to assume responsibility over increasingly larger territories and sales teams, usually with diminishing resources both financial and human, they spend too much of their time reacting to emergencies.

They can be exhausted, uninspired and focused primarily on maintenance of the status quo. The best managers show solid leadership and management skills and can thrive in this high-pressure environment, but proactive, far-sighted managers such as these are hard to come by.

In today's world, company leaders should be on alert for these types of sales managers:

Pass Through Pros: These managers are easy to identify, because they speak a common language called "They." They're the managers who always refer to the company as "Them," as in "They want us to do this ..." or "They have given us these goals to hit ... can you believe it?" They're profoundly confused about what their job is, and try to be the sales staff's best pal, when what they really need to be is their coach. They swim from company to company, making as few waves as possible.

Reverse Delegators: Like Pass Through Pros, this group is fundamentally deluded about the true nature of their jobs. They think a manager's primary focus should be keeping their sales reps happy.

These managers are emotionally invested in and deeply committed to their sales staff, to the point where they become buried trying to meet their every need. After all, the sales

force is delegating much of its problem solving and difficult work directly to their willing manager. Thus the name, Reverse Delegator.

What they should focus on instead, however, is helping their reps become more productive.

What do Pass Through Manager Pros and Reverse Delegators have in common? They have a corner on the “mediocrity” market, and they waste the potential of thousands of talented sales professionals who are stuck in patterns of under-achievement. And it doesn't have to be that way!

Managers must go to the uncomfortable places: It should be evident by now that most sales managers must change the way they perceive and carry out their jobs.

Managers who are afraid to make waves when wave making is necessary shouldn't be managing. Besides, in all truth, they're not managing because they're too busy putting out fires to work one-on-one with sales team members. Retire those managers from the fire department, and put them back into direct selling!

For sales to improve, initiative starts at the top. Company leaders and sales managers who practice the same degree of self-honesty and commitment to change as their sales reps will achieve this ultimate goal: a growth-oriented environment that thrives on constant improvement and the creation of unstoppable momentum, regardless of the economic conditions.

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