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What Does 'Good' Look Like?

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"Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence." – Vince Lombardi

Remember the funny Volkswagen commercial of the little boy awkwardly throwing the ball and the dad continuing to chase after the wildly thrown ball while encouraging his son? And then the camera pans back to the dad to reveal that he throws the exact incorrect way that he is teaching his son to throw?

Incompetence reinforcing incompetence.

Well, that experience is happening more than we would like to believe with our sales teams. Let me provide two real-life examples:

The first happened recently when I was working with a new client. We had provided an assignment for our training participants to work in teams of three to develop a "finals" presentation to a prospect. Since it was a competition against their peers, we recommended that the teams pick their best presenter to deliver the message.

This company has a strong brand in its vertical with a seasoned team but has had some inconsistency with quota attainment in a large portion of the team. As the vice president of sales, director of training and I watched and judged the "finals" presentations, what we experienced was all over the map in terms of quality of content and presentation skills. Suffice to say, it was not good.

This experience made both the training team and the executive in charge of the team aware that there was a lot of development and structure needed in order to develop competency in this presentation area.

As the vice president of sales sat there in disbelief (at how bad the presentations were), one of his line sales managers applauded the entire team, "I would rate all of these presentations and presentation skills as excellent."

Really? Was he watching the same presentations we were watching? But the most frightening aspect of his comments was that he was the one directly responsible for coaching his team. If he couldn't recognize competence, how could he coach to it? He was reinforcing bad.

This begs the question: Does your sales organization even know what good looks like? Have you defined what best practice prospecting, sales call execution, presenting your value proposition, etc. look like for your sales team? Has your sales managers observed their teams in all aspects of the sales process?

I would be willing to bet that most organizations don't have a clue. They make an investment in outside training companies' ability to train their teams but really have no quality control in place to ensure their team is effectively executing what is being taught.

Let me provide another short real-life example. I was working with a sales manager from a financial services organization, and we were coaching her team on individual sales presentations. As one of her sales reps finished one of the most horrific presentations I have experienced, I was anxious for her to get to the feedback session. In this particular case, I was coaching the sales manager so I wanted her to lead the feedback.

Incidentally, feedback should always start with the person self-assessing what worked and what he or she would do differently next time. Starting with self-assessment helps to calibrate how much coaching is needed based on how self-aware the person is regarding his or her competence.

In this particular case, the sales manager did not get the sales rep's self-assessment first. Instead, she proceeded to launch into all-out assault of positive accolades as to content and delivery and how great the presenter did. After this wonderful feedback session, the sales rep left feeling like he had conquered the world.

So when it was my time to coach the sales manager, I asked her to self-assess on her coaching of the situation. As one might expect, she felt pretty darn good about how she had coached this individual so that he would have confidence in the future. I then asked her if she really felt the presentation and the presenter hit the mark. She said no (which I was glad because it at least proved she was competent) but commented that she wanted to reinforce the presenter to build his confidence.

She quickly realized that she had just reinforced a "bad" performance, and this was likely to be the way the rep would present to a "live" prospect in the field. It is the father teaching the son to throw the wrong way or the golf pro reinforcing a bad swing because they rationalize that the outcome "isn't so bad." Or is it?

High-achieving sales organizations have determined what good looks like in all aspects of their sales process. They understand that they must observe it, coach to it, and hold their teams accountable to it.

Question: Has your sales managers observed your sales team in all aspects of the sales process? Do you know what your organizational best practice is when it comes to sales execution?

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