



Vantage Point Performance
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TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR SALES PIPELINE

How to Coach Your Reps to Close Deals Faster

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Wash, Rinse, Repeat

We were recently hired by one of the largest companies in the world to assess the coaching abilities of its sales management team. Like in many sales forces, the primary interactions between the managers and their salespeople come in the form of weekly 'pipeline review' meetings, where each rep meets with their direct manager to discuss active opportunities. Nearly every interaction we observed went something like this:

Manager: *Hi, Dan. So, bring me up to speed on what's happened with your pipeline this week.*

Salesperson: *Well, first there's Company A. That deal is still dragging, but I've scheduled a meeting for Wednesday with the president of the division to review the products we're proposing.*

Manager: *So what's your best guess of when that might close?*

Salesperson: *Probably a little later than I originally predicted. Say 3 weeks from now.*

Manager (updating his revenue forecast spreadsheet): *Hey, that reminds me, did you talk to Company B about that huge proposal we have outstanding with them?*

Salesperson: *Yes, I did. I spoke with Susan there just yesterday, and that is looking really good. I'd expect to have a signed contract within the next few days.*

Manager: *Excellent! I'll increase the probability of that deal to 90%. I have a meeting later today with my boss, and that'll make him smile.* (He updates the revenue forecast spreadsheet again.) *What else is moving?*

Salesperson: *Well, there's Company C. I'm particularly frustrated with this one. The CIO is not returning my calls, so I've scheduled some time on Friday morning with the director of operations to see what's happening.*

Manager: *Okay. Just keep me posted. Maybe shoot me an e-mail after your meeting to let me know if the deal is dead or still alive. I don't want to keep it in the forecast if it's really just a ghost. What else do you have?*

↑ (Repeat) ↑

This dialogue undoubtedly takes place thousands of times a day in sales forces around the world; however, the conversation is fraught with blunders that reduce what *could* have been a valuable manager-salesperson interaction to an administrative

non-event. Let us explore where these sales pipeline conversations commonly go wrong and how they can be transformed into high-value interactions.

Blunder 1: 'Inspecting' the Pipeline

As a result of the recent economic downturn, we have noticed an unprecedented focus on the sales pipeline and revenue forecast accuracy. Senior executives want to know where their business is headed in the very near term, and they want to know it now.

This exaggerated need for real-time reporting has turned many sales managers into full-time inspectors of their salespeople's pipelines. Gone are meaningful interactions, where managers both provide strategic guidance and develop their salespeople's selling skills... Now salespeople and their managers sit across the desk from one another with their heads down, poring over reports to ensure that their pipeline data is defensible to senior executives. Unfortunately, the immediate need for inspection has overwhelmed the greater need for coaching.

Best Practice: 'Coaching' the Seller

For the record, 'inspection' is an attempt to verify tasks or events that have already occurred. It captures the current state of high-profile sales opportunities and attempts to force compliance with reporting guidelines. While often a required duty for sales managers, it is essentially a forensic exercise that has very low value for a salesperson.

'Coaching' is forward-looking. It is a deliberate effort to develop a seller's abilities by posing thoughtful questions and deciding together what the salesperson should do to succeed in the future. It is time intensive for a manager, but it has very high value for salespeople and creates long-term value for the company.

Figure 1: Inspection vs. Coaching

Inspection	Coaching
> Tactical in nature	> Developmental in nature
> Explores what has already occurred	> Asks what to do differently in the future
> Assesses seller compliance with agreed-upon expectations	> Focuses on building skills and execution
> Required by manager, but low-value for seller	> Very time-intensive, but high-value for seller and coach

The more time sales managers spend inspecting, the less time they can spend coaching. The best sales forces understand this intuitively, but in reality all sales forces struggle to coach consistently. To build your sales team's capability, you must free your managers from their inspector duties and provide them with the training and tools to enable more productive manager-seller interactions.

Blunder 2: Late-Stage Involvement

Another characteristic of low-impact pipeline meetings is an almost exclusive emphasis on opportunities that are in the late stages of their sales cycle. This is, of course, driven by the desire to examine deals that are about to close, since the probability of winning them and the immediacy of the financial impact gives these opportunities very high visibility.

Unfortunately, staring obsessively at late-stage opportunities will have little impact on your eventual success. These deals have often been in progress for quite a while, and their fates have likely already been determined by the buyers. While you may be able to increase your forecast accuracy by constantly revisiting late-stage opportunities, you probably won't change their ultimate outcomes. So *where* you spend your coaching time is a meaningful decision.

Best Practice: Early-Stage Coaching

Research has proven that coaching is most powerful early in the selling cycle. Foremost, this is where sales managers can help to disqualify low-quality leads that will later clog up the pipeline and consume valuable resources. Secondly, early-stage opportunities are still being shaped by the buyer and seller, so they are more prone to influence than well-defined, late-stage deals.

If implemented in a thoughtful fashion, early-stage coaching lays the groundwork for late-stage success. Given the choice, a sales manager should always choose to do their coaching early and often, rather than waiting until the end of the sales cycle to haggle with the seller over probabilities and close dates.

Blunder 3: Casual Conversation

Finally, the manager-salesperson dialogue we shared at the opening of this paper was a casual affair. Starting with the most top-of-mind deals, the conversation wandered from place to

place with only one destination in mind – an updated, validated pipeline report.

Casual conversation is certainly a more natural and comfortable way for two people to interact, particularly when discussing potentially difficult topics. However, a fast-paced, wandering dialogue only skips across the top of a deeper conversation that would not only uncover dangers that are lurking beneath the surface, but would also help the seller navigate the opportunities in a more deliberate and skillful way.

Best Practice: Structured Planning

A high-quality sales pipeline discussion is actually a very structured conversation that forces the manager and seller to explicitly do the following things:

- 1) Prioritize the opportunities they want to discuss
- 2) Confirm their strategic roadmap for each opportunity
- 3) Plan the specific customer interactions that will advance them down that path

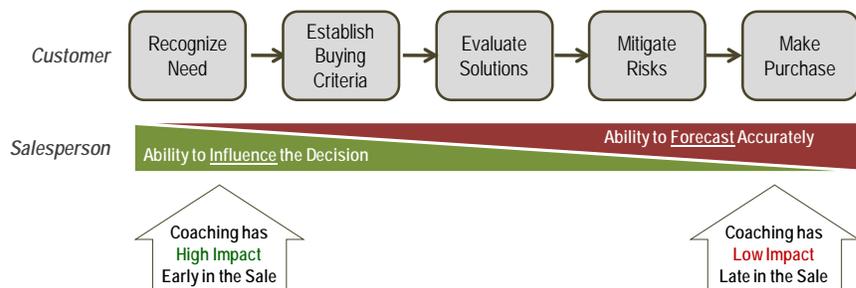
Following this Pipeline CoachingSM framework in your early-stage pipeline meetings will help focus your salespeople on the deals that are both winnable and aligned with your go-to-market strategy. Don't let the salesperson ramble through the opportunities – Challenge them to explain why they brought those deals to the table and why you should be discussing them at this time. By prioritizing the opportunities that you discuss (and consequently the opportunities that the salesperson pursues), you will build a cleaner and healthier pipeline almost immediately.

Next, you should establish or reconfirm the overall strategy for each opportunity:

- > Is this still a viable opportunity?
- > Have we contacted all the buyers and influencers?
- > Do we know all the critical buying criteria?
- > How are we positioned against our competitors?
- > What is our best next step to win this opportunity?

If questions like these are posed and answered thoughtfully, it

Figure 2: Early-Stage vs. Late-Stage Coaching



prevents the salesperson from becoming a heads-down tactician and defines a clear strategy for them to successfully navigate each opportunity.

The final step of a good pipeline coaching session is to prepare the salesperson for their next customer interaction... That is, to do a call plan. We too often observe conversations like our opening vignette where the salesperson informs the manager of upcoming customer meetings, but the manager doesn't take the time to inquire about them.

Some examples of things that you should ask your salesperson before each meaningful sales call are:

- > What is the objective of the call?
- > Which key issues will you explore?
- > What types of questions will you ask?
- > What type of resistance do you anticipate, and how will you respond?
- > What do you think will be reasonable next steps, and how will you gain agreement?

Questions like these force the seller to think through their approach to each customer interaction and to decide how to best facilitate it. It also allows the manager to get inside the seller's head and to pinpoint skills that are in need of development. Even if the call does not go according to plan, the act of planning is invaluable in raising the key issues and developing salespeople's skills.

Putting It All Together

Revisiting the interaction that opened this paper, we can now envision a more productive conversation. Perhaps it would have gone something like this:

Manager: *Hi, Dan. So which opportunities are we going to discuss this week?*

Salesperson: *Well, I have one new deal that I'd like to run by you, and there are a couple of early-stage opportunities where I could use your input on how to keep them moving.*

Manager: *Sounds good. What's first?*

Salesperson: *I received a referral from one of our current customers – It's a financial services company that is interested in our old line of products.*

Manager: *Hmm. We don't have a lot of experience in the financial services industry, but more importantly, we are trying to retire that product line. Do you think this is where you want to invest your time?*

Salesperson: *Well, now that you point it out, that would be an uphill battle and consume a lot of time. Let me see if I can shift their interest to our new line of products. If not, I'll probably kill it.*

Manager: *Sounds like a good plan.*

Salesperson: *So now let's talk about Company A. As you know, this deal has been dragging.*

Manager: *Okay. As I recall, we are pretty well positioned to win that deal.*

Salesperson: *Yes. We know all of the key players, and we've been able to convince them that the competition's products don't really meet their need. The only holdout is the president of the division. Unfortunately, he's been the most difficult to engage, and I get the sense that he's uncomfortable with our technology. But I was able to schedule a meeting with him for Wednesday to review the products we are proposing.*

Manager: *You mentioned that you think the president is not comfortable with our technology. Is he specifically uncomfortable with our products, or is he generally uncomfortable about upgrading to a newer technology – regardless of the supplier?*

Salesperson: *I'm not sure, but I believe it's the overall change in technology that he's resisting. He seems to perceive it as a high-risk decision.*

Manager: *Are you planning to explore the president's feelings about the change to new technology?*

Salesperson: *Yes, I think that would be a good idea.*

Manager: *How will you do that during the meeting?*

Salesperson: *If he doesn't come right out and share his concern, I'll say something like, "With a decision of this nature, it's common and completely understandable to have reservations. I want to make sure that we give you the opportunity to share any concerns you have so we can work through them together."*

Manager: *Great. Once you give him a chance to voice his concerns, what are you going to try to accomplish with the call?*

Figure 3: Vantage Point's Pipeline Coachingsm Framework



Salesperson: *Well, I think a reasonable objective is to gain agreement from the president to let us test the product in a single region. That would demonstrate the product's value and also alleviate some of his fear.*

Manager: *I agree that seems like a reasonable next step. To build on that, have you thought about introducing the president to one of our current customers who already has the new technology in place? That could also calm his nerves.*

Salesperson: *That is a great idea. I'll offer that to him. I'll select a reference customer who was also fearful about changing technology, so the president can see that there is less risk than he suspects.*

Manager: *So what do you need to do to prepare for the meeting?*

Salesperson: *Well, I suppose I need to find a customer reference that will resonate with him – probably someone inside his industry, like Company B. Perhaps I'll even get agreement from Company B's CEO before Wednesday. I know him pretty well, and that could make it easier to gain the president's agreement right on the spot.*

Manager: *Super. Sounds like you have a good plan of attack. Which other opportunities would you like to discuss today?*

↑ (Repeat) ↑

This second version of the pipeline discussion clearly had a greater impact on the seller. First, the manager helped the salesperson focus their effort on better qualified opportunities. Second, the manager ensured that the seller had fully considered the strategic context of one important deal that they were pursuing. And finally, the manager forced the salesperson to plan tactically for a specific interaction that was critical to advancing the sale.

Coaching vs. Inspection. Early-stage vs. Late. Structured vs. Casual. This sales manager has now taken control of their sales pipeline.

Next Steps

Vantage Point Performance's Pipeline CoachingSM system provides you with the training, tools, and support required to transform your pipeline meetings from casual, late-stage inspections to structured, early-stage coaching sessions. We integrate management and coaching best practices with change-management strategies that have been proven to build bigger, shorter sales pipelines.

If you would like to take control of your pipeline and coach your reps to close deals faster, please [Click Here](#) to receive additional information.