

The Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams: 'Effective Team Alignment'



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High Performing Sales Teams Implement Team Selling for Effective Team Alignment

Prior to launching PMI ten years ago, I held Chief Sales Officer positions with several organizations. Sometimes my Chief Sales Officer responsibilities included marketing and sometimes my responsibilities included customer service. But in all cases, it was clearly understood that I was the guy responsible for making the numbers. I often reflect upon these experiences in my client work today. It was probably the best preparation that anyone could have for the type of work that PMI does, and other PMI'ers with the same type of background agree: the challenges of modern sales executives are daunting and formidable, and "walking in their shoes" is the only way to truly understand the stress and difficulty of this role.



By combining my own experiences with the client Chief Sales Officers that I have had the opportunity to work with, certain things stand out as best practices required for high performance. In some cases, success can be connected with a specific best practice because it has been implemented. In some cases, there has been a lack of success that appears to result from the absence of a specific best practice. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will focus on sales best practices that tend to be predictors of success in sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

Best Practice: Effective Team Alignment



High performing sales teams define sales roles and responsibilities and implement team selling to enable effective sales execution and collaboration. They recognize that when their sales efforts are harmonized, balanced and synchronized across the entire sales or account team, the results are always greater than those of any single individual, regardless of their role or position. Sales team members work more effectively together in a synergistic environment where there is a foundation of sharing, trust and cooperation rather than control, tension and conflict.

Team Play vs. Individual Heroics

In most business-to-business selling environments that we see today, there is a selling or account team representing the supplier attempting to connect with a buying or decision team representing the customer. Why is this alignment between the supplier's team and the customer's team so difficult for most sales organizations? We feel that it begins with a lack of internal alignment within the supplier's own team members – which can result from ill-defined roles, conflicting goals and compensation plans, account control issues, as well as a number of other factors. When the selling/account team is not aligned internally, it is difficult for team members to sell together as a synchronized unit and this typically does not go unnoticed by the customer.



Customers tell us that when they sense that their “supplier team” is not aligned it creates a sense of concern regarding the supplier's ability to set realistic expectations, execute and deliver results. Lack of effective teamwork invariably creates situations where certain individuals have to perform at higher levels to meet customer needs, and as we all know, individual heroics are typically difficult to predict or forecast. Most customers will tell you that they prefer to deal with a functional and harmonized supplier team than to depend on a few top performers to continually save the day. In short, effective teamwork can reduce the customer's feelings of risk and exposure, and provide the supplier with more balanced sales performance as a result.

Taking the Field

Before a team can align effectively it must be developed and structured, and this means that the team must understand “who does what” and how the sum of the talents and skills of the team members create a force much stronger than that of any individual. Customer-facing supplier teams are typically organized with specific objectives in mind, including the pursuit of new sales opportunities, the development of long-term account relationships and the delivery of solutions and services after the sale. In each of these, it is important to ensure that the members of the team understand their role or “position” and how it relates to overall team performance.

Customers tell us that they appreciate the opportunity to have a voice in the determination of the supplier's team. Since resources and expertise are always key factors in the creation of customer-specific value (please see Article 7 in this series: ***Customer Value Focus***), it's important to consider fit and ultimate team-to-team alignment with the customer when selecting the right resources for your customer-facing team. And keep this in mind: sometimes it's better to build a team that can take the field and perform effectively together even if it means that you pass on certain “position players” that may be best in class but not necessarily a good fit when it comes to working effectively with the rest of your team or with your customer.



Calling the Plays



Show me a team that is well-aligned and consistently creating customer-specific value and I'll show you a team that has an appreciation for the importance of team leadership, including the role of the team quarterback. It's the same in sales as it is in sports: people respond to effective leadership, particularly when the leader is personally involved, able to demonstrate best practices and willing to take the time to understand other team members and what's important to each of them.

All too often, sales teams are put into pressurized situations where there doesn't seem to be enough time to "do things right" due to customer requirements that result in tight timeframes and difficult deadlines. Someone has to be in a position of leading the team and ultimately calling the plays – and our experience is that in most cases, sales teams benefit from effective "play calling" by the person in the roll of team quarterback.

This doesn't mean that this individual has all of the answers or is even the ranking member of the team – but it does mean that this individual is in the role of "strategy owner" for the opportunity or account at hand. In most selling environments that we see today, this responsibility of strategy owner typically resides with the account executive or strategic account manager, particularly as strategy relates to winning new sales opportunities or growing relationships with strategic customers.

Playing to Win

So now that we've built our team and defined our roles, how do we optimize team performance? Many of us have been asked in the past to join teams that lacked focus and failed to execute with consistency – and these types of situations can negatively impact personal productivity and result in the creation of potential conflicts with other team members.

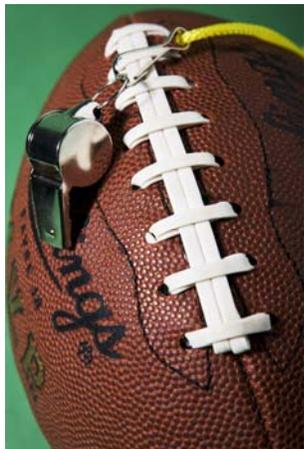
We find that the best way to avoid this is to ensure that there is a clearly defined and communicated strategy that all team members understand and support. A sales or account team that is well-aligned should have good connection between individual team members in areas that can include customer problem solving, customer relationship building and customer communication and collaboration, among others.

These team members realize that it's more important to win than it is to be right – a truism that was shared by a client in this way:

"At the end of the day we measure results in terms of customer value creation, not in terms of who had the best ideas on our sales and account teams. It's when we work this way that our customers see us at our best."



Coaching Effective Team Alignment



How can sales management and leadership contribute to effective team alignment?

We all recognize the importance of effective sales coaching in today's challenging selling environment (please see Article 2 in this series: **Effective Sales Coaching**), but in many cases this coaching takes on the form of assessing sales opportunities and reviewing strategic or key accounts.

We suggest that the effective sales coach “tune in” early when sales and account teams are being formed and assist the teams in determining priorities and identifying potential obstacles before problems begin. Coaching team alignment may not be as intuitive for the typical sales coach as “coaching to win” sales

opportunities or “coaching to grow” strategic customer relationships, so here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- Confirm that the value to the team of each individual member is clear, as is their primary role and responsibilities.
- Ensure that the value to the customer of each individual member is clear, as are their primary connection points with targeted customer buying and decision team members.
- Validate that there is an effective strategy in place that the team will pursue: this may be a competitive strategy to win a specific sales opportunity or a growth strategy to evolve a strategic customer relationship to the next level.
- Checkpoint with the team quarterback or leader that they are communicating regularly and clearly with other team members, and that they are refraining from calling too many last-minute “audible plays at the line of scrimmage” that may be unclear to the team and result in stress and confusion.
- Never usurp the authority or role of the team leader in front of the rest of the team – even if you disagree with them. The best approach for “coaching your quarterback” is one-on-one and away from the rest of the team.

Conclusion

High performing sales teams define roles and responsibilities and implement team selling to enable effective sales execution and collaboration. They understand that a balanced and synchronized sales team will be more consistent in their creation of customer value and development of deeper and wider customer relationships.

Effective team alignment requires effort – it's not easy. But the sustained competitive advantages of implementing team selling within well-aligned sales and account teams is quite compelling, and the impact of effective team alignment on key customer relationships can be a significant differentiator in markets where customers have difficulty distinguishing one supplier's solution from another's.

Alignment with customers should be an early objective of every sales and account team, and one thing is certain: if we aren't effectively aligned internally within our own team, the likelihood of aligning effectively externally with the customer's team is quite remote.

Next Month

Our next article will extend team selling and alignment into the discovery and creation of new opportunities. In ***Cross Sell and Leverage the “Whole,”*** we will examine how high performing sales teams leverage their **Effective Team Alignment, Consultative Selling Skills** and **Proven Sales Best Practices** to ensure that their sales efforts maintain a strong **Customer Value Focus** (Articles 5, 6, 7 and 8 in this series).

Performance Methods, Inc., recognized by TrainingIndustry.com as one of the ***2009 Top Sales Training Companies***, will be featured in a series of articles that will focus on the **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams**. PMI is proud to serve the needs of a broad group of industry-leading companies and will be sharing with the TrainingIndustry.com readership how leading global firms are deploying proven best practices to increase sales effectiveness, create customer value, grow customer relationships and gain competitive advantage. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will cover a number of critical areas of sales performance and provide readers with insight into how sales best practices are being deployed effectively by world-class sales organizations in a variety of industries. These articles will provide special emphasis on key best practices driving effective sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

