Coaching That Moves The Middle

Idea In Short

Sales coaching fails not for lack of intent but for lack of structure. Most managers believe they coach often; the data show otherwise and the gap between intention and practice is where quota attainment quietly erodes. The fix is not more enthusiasm, it is a deliberate operating system: a weekly cadence protected on the calendar, a small set of leading metrics that separate skill gaps from pipeline gaps and a conversation structure that replaces deal rescue with behavior change. Revenue leaders who install this system stop treating coaching as a personality trait some managers happen to have and start treating it as a repeatable commercial capability. The organizations that get this right concentrate coaching hours on their core performers, the largest and most movable segment of any sales force, rather than spreading attention evenly or gravitating toward whoever shouts loudest about a stalled deal.

Sales coaching sits at an odd intersection in most commercial organizations. Leadership treats it as obviously important, budgets rarely fund it as a discipline and frontline managers, many of them promoted for selling well rather than for developing others, are left to improvise. The result is a familiar pattern: quarterly business reviews cite coaching as a priority, yet one-on-ones get bumped for pipeline fire drills and the only structured feedback a rep receives comes during an annual performance review months after the behavior in question occurred. Building commercial excellence around coaching requires treating it the way a company treats forecasting or pricing governance, as a process with defined cadence, defined metrics and defined conversation structure, not as a matter of individual manager disposition.

Why coaching remains the most underused lever in revenue growth

Frontline sales managers occupy a position with disproportionate influence over seller output, yet most spend far less time coaching than they believe. Harvard Business School senior lecturer Frank V. Cespedes has written that managers typically overestimate how much time they devote to coaching and when they do carve out time, conversations gravitate toward results and pending deals rather than the behaviors that produce those results1. That distinction matters because reviewing a lagging indicator, closed revenue, tells a rep what happened but nothing about what to do differently. A one-size-fits-all script compounds the problem, since a rep struggling with discovery questions needs a different conversation than one who closes well but manages a territory poorly. Salesforce's global survey of more than 7,700 sales professionals found that only 26 percent receive one-on-one coaching at least weekly, even though the same research shows sellers with a coach are considerably more confident about hitting targets2. The gap between stated priority and actual practice is where a commercial excellence initiative should start, because closing it costs little beyond calendar discipline.

Designing a coaching cadence that survives a busy quarter

A cadence only works if it is protected the same way a board meeting or a compliance deadline is protected, meaning it does not move when the pipeline gets messy. A practical structure for a manager with six to eight direct reports includes a weekly one-on-one of 30 to 45 minutes per rep dedicated to one recorded call, one live opportunity, or one skill area, held separately from the pipeline review meeting where forecast numbers get scrubbed. Monthly, that cadence should widen into a call review across two or three interactions to spot patterns rather than one-off moments and quarterly, a longer conversation should cover career trajectory and skill development goals independent of any single deal. McKinsey's research on agile B2B sales organizations found that companies outperforming their peers structure weekly coaching into the operating rhythm of the sales team and back it with analytics that track how much time managers actually spend on individual development, rather than relying on managers to self-report3. Consider an illustrative scenario at a mid-market industrial equipment distributor: before introducing a fixed cadence, regional managers held one-on-ones sporadically, often only when a deal stalled and new hires took nine months to reach full productivity. After the company mandated a protected weekly slot per rep with a standing agenda separate from pipeline review, ramp time for new hires fell by roughly a third within two selling cycles, illustrating how calendar structure alone can change outcomes before any new skill content is introduced.

Separating deal coaching from skill coaching

Managers gravitate toward deal coaching because it feels immediately useful: a rep brings a stalled opportunity, the manager suggests a next step and the conversation has a visible outcome. Skill coaching is less satisfying in the moment because it requires spotting a pattern across several deals, for example a rep who consistently skips economic-buyer conversations or discounts early to accelerate a close and then addressing the underlying behavior rather than the transaction in front of you. Both forms of coaching matter, but they serve different purposes and should not be conflated in the same conversation. A manager who only ever coaches deals is functioning as an extra layer of deal desk support rather than as a developer of talent and that distinction becomes visible in retention data: reps who never receive skill-focused coaching plateau faster and are more likely to leave for a role with clearer development prospects. Effective managers signal explicitly which mode a conversation is in, opening a skill-coaching session with a question about a pattern rather than a specific account, which keeps the rep from defaulting into status-update mode.

Metrics that make coaching accountable rather than aspirational

A coaching scorecard needs both activity metrics and outcome metrics, because activity alone can be gamed and outcomes alone arrive too late to adjust course. On the activity side, track the frequency and duration of one-on-ones per rep, the ratio of skill-coaching to deal-coaching minutes and whether sessions were held during a busy week or postponed. On the outcome side, track stage-to-stage conversion rates, average discount depth, sales cycle length by rep and quota attainment segmented by tenure, since a newly promoted manager's team and a tenured manager's team should not be judged against the same baseline. Gartner's research on the sales manager role found that managers with clarity about where to focus, meaning they are not spread across coaching, deal support, forecasting and administrative work with no prioritization, can have several times the impact on seller performance compared with managers without that clarity4. The scorecard's purpose is not to punish managers who coach less than a target number of hours, since raw hours are a weak proxy for quality, but to surface when coaching activity has quietly dropped to zero for a rep who needs it most, often the core performer who is neither struggling enough to trigger intervention nor excelling enough to earn attention.

Structuring the conversation itself

A coaching conversation without structure tends to default to the manager talking and the rep nodding, which produces compliance rather than insight. The Situation-Behavior-Impact model works well for immediate, call-specific feedback: describe the specific situation, name the observable behavior and explain the impact it had, then pause and let the rep respond before offering a fix. For broader development conversations, a goal-oriented structure that moves from current reality to options to a committed next step keeps the discussion from drifting into generic encouragement. Frank V. Cespedes, describing why salespeople often struggle when promoted into management, put it directly.

> Compensation is important, but the research tells us that good coaching and performance reviews actually have a bigger impact on performance and this is a tangible skill that managers can be taught5

That last point is the operative one: coaching is teachable, which means an organization that treats it as an innate trait some managers happen to possess is leaving a trainable capability undeveloped. Managers should practice asking diagnostic questions, what did you try, what did the buyer say, what would you do differently, before offering their own view, since a rep who arrives at the answer independently retains it longer than one who is simply told.

Concentrating coaching where it produces the most return

Not every rep benefits equally from a given hour of coaching and organizations that spread attention evenly across a team often underinvest in the group with the most upside. Research popularized through the Challenger sales methodology, building on earlier CEB analysis, found that coaching's biggest returns come from core or middle performers rather than from stars, who already convert well, or from strugglers, whose issues are often a fit problem coaching cannot resolve. The same research found that combining structured training with ongoing coaching produced roughly four times the impact of training alone and that effective coaching improved a seller's gap to goal by as much as 19 percent6. Just as significant, poorly executed coaching hurt performance nearly twice as much as good coaching helped it, which means a manager who coaches frequently but without structure or diagnostic rigor may be actively undermining results rather than merely wasting time. That finding argues for manager training as a prerequisite, not an afterthought, before a coaching cadence gets rolled out broadly. A commercial excellence program that mandates weekly one-on-ones without first equipping managers to run them well risks institutionalizing bad coaching at scale, which the data suggest is worse than no formal cadence at all.

Building the infrastructure that sustains the habit

None of this holds without support from above the frontline manager. Second-line sales leaders should review coaching activity the way they review pipeline coverage, asking not just whether one-on-ones happened but what patterns emerged and what specific behavior changed as a result. Call recording and conversation intelligence tools can supply managers with evidence, such as talk-to-listen ratios or how often a rep asks open discovery questions, that would be impractical to gather by shadowing calls manually, though the technology supplies raw material for a conversation rather than replacing the conversation itself. Enablement teams should build a small library of coaching guides tied to the specific skills the organization has prioritized, so managers are not inventing a framework from scratch every week. And compensation or recognition systems should acknowledge manager development of talent, not only team quota attainment, since a manager whose team consistently promotes into bigger roles is building organizational capacity even if that manager's own numbers look unremarkable in a given quarter. Coaching, treated this way, stops being a soft skill managers either have or lack and becomes a measurable, improvable part of how a commercial organization compounds performance over time.

- 1Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to sales coaching
- 2New research reveals sales reps need a productivity overhaul
- 3Two ingredients for successful B2B sales: Agility and stability
- 4Redesign the sales manager role of the future
- 5Why salespeople struggle at leading
- 6The critical importance of coaching in sales

Summary

Coaching sales teams for commercial excellence depends less on talent and more on system design. A protected weekly cadence, a scorecard that separates skill from pipeline health, a conversation structure built on evidence rather than opinion and deliberate focus on core performers together turn coaching from an aspiration into an operating rhythm. Managers who are trained to coach, not just promoted because they once sold well,

produce measurably better outcomes than those left to improvise. None of this requires exotic technology or a large budget; it requires calendar discipline, a handful of consistent metrics and managers willing to ask questions instead of supplying answers. Organizations that treat coaching as infrastructure, reviewed and reinforced the way pipeline hygiene or forecast accuracy are reviewed, close the gap between what top and average sellers produce. That gap, more than any single tactic, determines whether a commercial excellence program moves the revenue needle or simply generates another slide deck.