



Use Best Practice to Fire Up Your Sales Team

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Jonathan Byrnes explains how best practices developed by your "A" performers can be used to train and motivate "B" and "C" players.

by Jonathan Byrnes

Many managers ask for references to best practices that they can observe and replicate. In virtually every company I've seen, the answer exists within the company itself.

I'm always amazed by the variety of practices within a company. Think about this: If you took a movie of everything your sales force did last year, edited it carefully, and played the best parts, I'll bet that you would have an absolutely stellar, world-class performance.

The problem, however, lies on the cutting room floor. This is where the evidence of the unevenness of practice in your company appears. But here's another way to look at it: It shows the magnitude of the potential upside if you could bring your whole team up to your own best practice standards.

The observed overall performance of the sales force is the weighted average of your best practice, your average practice, and your problematic practice. In most companies, the fastest and easiest way to improve your bottom line is to move all of your employees up to your own best practice. This is especially true of your sales force.

Most managers take for granted that their company has "A" players, "B" players, and "C" players, particularly in their sales force, and that their company's overall performance inevitably reflects this reality. In my experience, this assumption is almost always false.

The flaw in their view is the implicit assumption that the sales process, or any business process, cannot be analyzed, codified, taught, and coached so that even an employee of "average" ability can perform with consistent excellence. Why not?

Changing the changeover process

I recall visiting a major manufacturer several years ago. This was during the time when manufacturers were shifting from the long production runs that characterize mass production to the shorter production runs that are entailed by quick response systems. The difficulty in shifting production to quick response is that it requires very rapid changeovers of the production line from product to product.

This manufacturer developed a simple but ingenious approach to solving the changeover problem. They actually videotaped changeovers. The whole work team analyzed the tapes to identify improvements, much like a football coach watches game tapes.

With clear information before them, the factory workers developed new procedures. They also developed detailed processes to codify and teach the new changeover methods as well as measures to monitor their successful implementation. Changeover times were cut dramatically.

Standards of care

In medicine, there is a guiding principle called "standards of care." If you meet with a doctor before surgery, he or she will describe the procedure that you are going to experience. Most likely, the doctor will say something like, "If I see A, I'll do B; if I see C, I'll do D."

In this conversation, the doctor is describing well-established best practice "standards of care." These standards are based on rigorous research and well-analyzed experience. They are accessible and followed by practitioners throughout the field. These standards represent and provide the shared understanding of best practice. Leading researchers and practitioners are always trying to improve the standards of care in their

particular areas but no one should mistake this process for "winging it."

The "standards of care" process is extremely powerful. It allows the participants to systematically analyze and identify best practice and ensures that all practitioners adhere as closely as possible to this best practice. For perspective, the best surgeons will always be the most capable practitioners, but the "standards of care" system ensures that the rest of the surgeons practice as capably as possible. At the same time, it offers a way for leading specialists to subject the best practice standards to constant improvement and to spread the gains rapidly.

Managers can apply this process to dramatically improve their own businesses.

Business standards of care

Some may argue that the sales process, like other business processes, is inherently idiosyncratic: every customer is different, every sales rep is unique, and it's virtually impossible to systematize the process. In my experience, this view is counterproductive and wrong.

For example, account penetration is one of the most difficult processes in business. Many sales reps, particularly inexperienced ones, avoid trying to penetrate highly underpenetrated accounts. These accounts may be "locked" in a relationship with a competitor or may even be "turned off" to the rep's company because of a past incident. Yet, turning around a major account in which the company is doing little or no business is generally the highest-payoff use of the sales rep's time.

In several companies, I've had an opportunity to investigate this problem. The results were strikingly similar.

In a company, the best-performing sales reps, when interviewed independently of one another, typically have a very methodical and remarkably similar view of the account penetration process. They know almost meeting by meeting, month by month, what contacts and activities they will be working on. For sure, they know that the process will vary somewhat from account to account, and they know how to handle these variations. However, within the company, it quickly becomes clear that the top performers are "all on the same page."

The "B" and "C" players, however, are usually on a very different page, or more likely, very different pages. Most often, they will have widely varying views of the process, either very optimistic or very pessimistic in terms of the results-to-effort ratio. The overly optimistic reps quickly get discouraged by the seemingly slow initial phase of the penetration process, while the overly pessimistic reps simply avoid the whole process. In fact, in most companies, the high-performing reps will even be able to tell you at what point the "B" and "C" players will give up on a turnaround account and refocus on more "comfortable" accounts.

Compare this with the "standards of care" system in medicine.

In a company, the high-performing reps, the "A" players, have independently discovered a set of best practice standards that are strikingly similar from rep to rep. Over time, in numerous accounts, they have refined these standards to accommodate the variations in the sales process that occur naturally from account to account. Typically, however, these standards are not systematically gleaned and codified, but they exist nonetheless in parallel practice among the top performers.

Talking to these high-performing reps is very much like talking to an accomplished doctor. "If I see A, I'll do B; if I see C, I'll do D." But this is where the parallel ends.

The "B" and "C" players, on the other hand, generally do not have the experience or capability to discover best practices on their own. At the same time, all too often sales training is general in nature, focusing on developing broad capabilities like discovering customer needs, rather than helping the company's reps master critical company-specific best practice procedures.

Sales management often succumbs to the error of exhorting reps to improve their results, or coaching parts of the process piecemeal, rather than teaching and drilling critical company-specific best practice "standards of care." In most companies, it is this absence of systematic best practice knowledge and supporting mechanisms that leads to such great variance in practice.

Best practice process

Here is a seven-part process to create "standards of care" in your own company's sales force.

- **Identify best practice.** Try interviewing your top performers. Focus on key processes like territory management, account selection, the account penetration lifecycle, and day-to-day fundamentals like sales visits and follow-up.
- **Codify best practice.** Here, the key is to concentrate on a small number of high-payoff activities that can be translated into replicable processes, your "standards of care." To take an analogy from football, try dividing the world into fundamentals and game plans. Fundamentals include things like crisp sales calls and the ability to talk comfortably with customer managers and engineers; game plans include an account prioritization process and a small number of well-specified alternative account penetration lifecycle profiles.
- **Train the process.** The most effective training must go far beyond teaching general sales capabilities. It must focus on systematically teaching your reps your company-specific best practice "standards of care." For example, in the account penetration process, there likely will be a small number of well-proven game plans, and each of these will have several identifiable stages with particular critical activities at each stage. Every rep should know your best practice process and master in advance the essential skills necessary for success at each stage.
- **Coach the process.** Consider the words of Tom Brady, the New England Patriots' star quarterback: "The goal of winning three consecutive Super Bowls should take a back seat to putting together three straight quality practices." In the account penetration process there will be certain identifiable "pinch points" at each stage. For example, if a rep is moving into a stage in which the critical element is talking to engineers, the manager should coach and drill the rep in the process of talking to engineers until his or her performance is consistently excellent.
- **Measure the process.** All too often, sales measures are too vague and broad. In account penetration, measuring progress in moving an account from stage to stage is critical. Sometimes, important progress does not yield immediate revenues.
- **Compensate the process.** The compensation system must be aligned with the best practice process. If turnaround account management is critical, a significant component of compensation should be tied to account penetration milestones.
- **Constantly improve the process.** Like any "standard of care," your best performers will always find ways to make the process better. The key is to identify and capture these improvements and systematically move your whole sales force to this new and better level.

Cultural consistency

The most powerful aspect of harnessing your own best practice is that your sales force will be very receptive to the improvements. Your own best practice is literally your own. It was developed by your own top performers, whom everyone in your company respects and admires. The accounts in which the best practices worked are your own accounts, often legendary turnaround successes. Your reps will be hungry for an understanding of how they could do the same.

Harnessing the power of your own best practice is the best of all worlds. The "standards of care" are available within your own four walls. You can identify, codify, teach, coach, and spread them rapidly and effectively. And your own sales force will readily accept and embrace them.

See you next month. 

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