

Improving Skill Development with Sales Coaching



Success in sales requires growth and development. As reps hone their skills, coaching is crucial, but it's often done in the moment or only after the fact in co-selling activities.

With the right tools and a little planning, coaching can help improve your team's selling skills and productivity to ultimately achieve revenue growth for the business.

Let us show you how.



What Is Coaching?

Before we start, let's take a look at what effective sales coaching is and what it isn't. Ineffective coaching is often spontaneous, exclusively focused on co-selling and critiquing, lacks focus around sales plays, is indiscriminately given to top performers, laggards, and new hires, and is not prioritized as a key sales leader initiative.

Effective coaching, on the other hand, is a planned effort that involves step-by-step training, development, and improvement of sales skills so reps can be successful in achieving your organization's goals. According to Harvard Business Review, coaching is "unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance."¹

Coaching is less about telling reps what to do and more about showing them the way. It's all about fostering the intrinsic motivation that paves the way for their growth. It requires listening, questioning, constructive feedback, goal setting, empathy, structure, and ultimately letting reps arrive at their own solutions.



1. "Most Managers Don't Know How to Coach People. But They Can Learn." Harvard Business Review, August 14, 2018.



Five Effective Sales Coaching Strategies

Knowing what sales coaching should look like and actually doing it are entirely different matters. In today's sales organizations, most managers have not been taught how to coach their teams. Many of them are strong sellers who were promoted into managerial roles. But being a good seller doesn't necessarily make you a good manager or coach.

Becoming an effective coach requires that you embrace the role of a change agent. It requires that you invest in learning how to coach. The good news is that it comes down to just five sales coaching strategies. Let's explore them all.



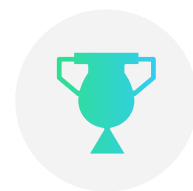
Define Your
Sales Plays



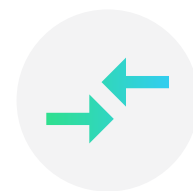
Create a
System for
Constructive
Feedback



Challenge
Reps to
Achieve Skill
Mastery



Promote Best
Practices
Among Peers



Open the
Lines of
Communication





1. Define Your Sales Plays

Selling is a multi-faceted job. There are many tasks that your sales reps need to accomplish on any given day. They work to develop relationships with customers and prospects, research target accounts, send prospecting emails, attend tradeshows, travel to customer sites, develop and deliver presentations—all under the pressure of monthly and quarterly quotas. They're all chasing after the next deal, as they should, but there's often little that helps them prioritize their activities.

Defining sales plays gives your reps focus.

In your role as a manager, a sales play can make your coaching proactive rather than reactive. If you see a rep embroiled in activities that don't support your sales play, you can redirect and lead them toward more appropriate selling tasks. It helps you coach with purpose.



1. Define Your Sales Plays



For example, if one of your primary sales plays involves selling to the c-suite rather than IT staff, you can proactively identify any activities that don't support this objective. If you see that one of your reps spends 80% of his time targeting IT network administrators without attention to the high-level needs of the business, you have the perfect opportunity to guide and redirect.

Your coaching efforts might be developed around other sales plays like increasing contract renewals, growing existing accounts through upsell activities, generating net new opportunities, selling to new vertical markets, or selling with a new message. You may have two or three sales plays in rotation at any given time. They might change monthly or quarterly. The point is that all sales reps know where they need to focus their activities, and your coaching is in support of a well-defined sales play.



2. Create a System for Constructive Feedback



Any rep who recognizes the need to grow and improve performance is going to look to you for feedback. These reps are hungry for guidance and will actively seek your approval. To be an effective coach, you need to make sure you give feedback and assess their efforts in a systematic, constructive way.

For sales managers who haven't been taught how to coach, this feedback typically comes in the form of off-hand comments after a customer meeting. Since human nature often has us focusing on the negative, these in-the-moment comments tend to target the rep's fumbles or foibles. Rarely do sales managers offer unsolicited praise, and rarely is it given in a constructive, proactive way.

As a coach, it's essential that you balance criticism with praise. Make sure you're evaluating your reps around your defined sales plays, and create a coaching plan that enables you to give short-term and long-term assessments on skill building. Determine areas of focus for evaluation, and build them around a monthly or quarterly plan with specific activities for review.



2. Create a System for Constructive Feedback

There are several skills and activities that you might evaluate in your coaching. For example, if one of your sales plays involves growing net new opportunities, you'll want to define activities that support this play. One such activity would be researching accounts to understand their growth ambitions. As a coach, you'll want to periodically evaluate your reps' research activities and develop a formal assessment process around these activities.

Other activities to assess in your coaching might include targeting and researching executive audiences, conducting contact campaigns to start conversations, practicing an identity message to demonstrate relevance to executive audiences, and leading executive conversations with a whiteboard story. The key is making evaluation and assessment easy on yourself.

With a coaching plan, there's no question as to where to focus your criticism and praise.



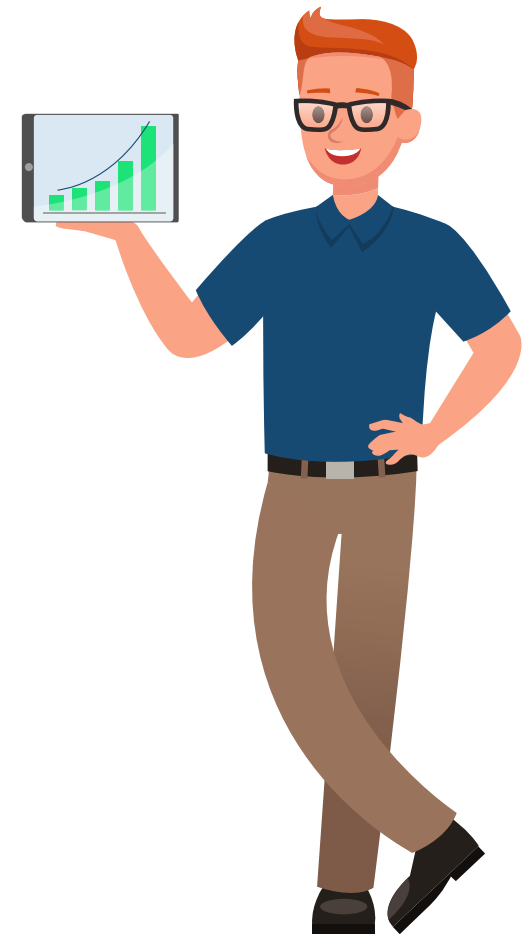
3. Challenge Reps to Achieve Skill Mastery



With any sales play, there are specific activities reps need to accomplish to achieve the goals of that play. **Your role as coach is to not only define the sales play for your reps, but also identify the skills and activities that help them achieve success with that play.**



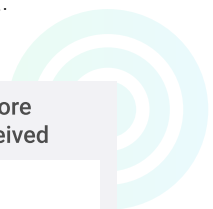
When you define the activities that support a sales play, it's important to break them down into actionable, relevant, and sales-ready tasks. Video and other multimedia capabilities play a key role in enabling these tasks.

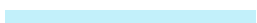
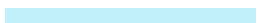
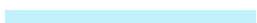


3. Challenge Reps to Achieve Skill Mastery

For example, sales-ready activities include having reps upload an audio file of themselves delivering a customized talk track message. You might have your reps record themselves delivering a two-minute story in preparation for a customer meeting. Or they might prepare and upload a conversation plan for an upcoming meeting with a customer.

As a coach, your job is to challenge your reps to achieve mastery around the skills that define the sales play. And in the spirit of coaching, these activities aren't defined so that you can specifically tell reps what to do. You're giving them the content, tools, and activities that enable them to guide their own performance improvement.



Challenges	Key Play Template	Feedback	Take Action	Score Received
Key Play Template				
90% Complete	 What to Know			
	☒ 			10/10
	☒ 			20/20
	 What to Say			
	☐ Record a video of the Identity Message			
	☒ 			40/40
	 What to Do			
	☒ 			100/100





4. Promote Best Practices Among Peers

In your coaching, use the best practices developed by your team to your advantage. Best practices don't necessarily need to come from you, and if you see one of your reps succeeding with a particular activity, by all means, share it with the team. Often, it will be your high-performing, high-earning reps who will have the best ideas for improvement, but best practices can come from anyone in the team. The idea is to be on the lookout for them and create a platform for the sharing of ideas.



Here again, audio and video make a big impact. **When you share and promote video and audio examples of best practices, your reps can learn from each other in an easy, organic way.** Sales reps often work in geographically distributed areas and only interact with each other in brief moments and in meetings that are spent discussing other topics. Today's technology enables them to easily share a video of an effective whiteboard delivery, for example. They might also share an audio file of a talk track tailored for a CMO. Or they can share example emails that have proven successful when targeting a prospective industry or account.



4. Promote Best Practices Among Peers

By the same token, you can use competition among peers to encourage success. Sales reps are naturally competitive, and when they are given an opportunity to compete against each other, it creates a great opportunity for coaching. You can use a scoring mechanism for sales play activities and create a leaderboard that highlights those who score highest. By sparking friendly competition in this way, you're encouraging reps to complete activities to the best of their ability and giving the team visibility into how their peers are performing.

Rank	Rep Name	Total
1 st	 _____	_____
2 nd	 _____	_____
3 rd	 _____	_____
4 th	 _____	_____
5 th	 _____	_____
6 th	 _____	_____



5. Open the Lines of Communication



In addition to the coaching strategies mentioned above, keeping the lines of communication open is one of the most important things you can do as a coach. You need to define sales plays, evaluate reps' performance against sales play activities, challenge reps to achieve skill mastery, and encourage idea-sharing among peers, but being open to communication is critical. **When you think of coaching as enabling reps to take responsibility for their own improvement, you need to be available for questions and act as a sounding board for reps.**

Similarly, it's important to ask the questions that get reps thinking and talking about their successes and opportunities for improvement. You might ask questions like:

- Did that work well for the customer conversation?
- What could you have done differently?
- What was most challenging about a particular sales play or task?
- What resource could you use to improve your knowledge and understanding of the customer's situation?



By asking open-ended questions that show that you're invested in reps' success, they will be more likely to share. Communication in this way is critical to helping reps come to their own answers and find their way as they look to improve—key elements of any effective coaching effort.



Improve Your Sales Coaching Efforts

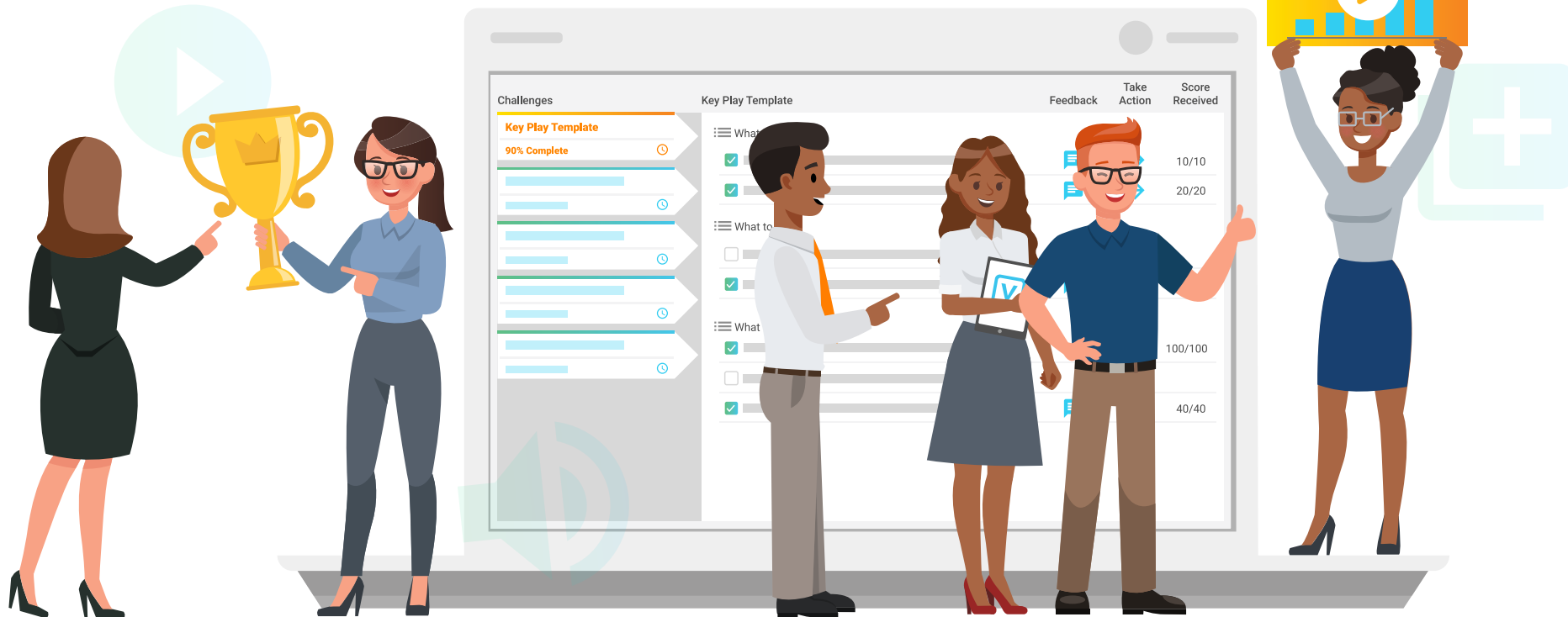
Sales coaching involves much more than co-selling or in-the-moment critiques. It requires a planned effort with the tools and resources that reps need to foster their own skill development and improvement.



The illustration shows a large digital dashboard with several sections. On the left, a woman in a black dress presents a large gold trophy to a woman in a blue shirt and glasses. The dashboard itself has a 'Challenges' section with a 'Key Play Template' that is '90% Complete'. It also features a 'Key Play Template' section with a list of items, some marked with checkmarks. To the right, there is a 'Feedback' section with a table showing 'Take Action' and 'Score Received'.

Feedback	Take Action	Score Received
10/10		
20/20		
100/100		
40/40		

On the far right, a woman in a grey shirt and blue skirt holds up a yellow bar chart. The background is white with faint blue geometric shapes.



How Strong Is Your Sales Coaching?

Use this short checklist to evaluate your coaching capabilities and to identify areas of improvement.

- ☐ I see coaching as a key sales manager responsibility.
- ☐ My coaching does not revolve around co-selling activities.
- ☐ I have a planned approach to coaching and giving feedback.
- ☐ I enable sales reps to come to their own conclusions and drive their own improvement efforts.
- ☐ I use sales plays to define my reps' selling activities.
- ☐ I consistently evaluate and assess my team's sales activities.
- ☐ My team has the tools and resources they need to challenge themselves to improve.
- ☐ I provide a platform for idea-sharing among my team.
- ☐ I foster friendly competition among the team.
- ☐ I ask the questions that encourage reps to share their successes and opportunities for improvement.

How do you fare with the items on this checklist?
If you said yes to...



0-3: You could use a new approach to sales coaching. Do what you can to change your mindset about coaching and recognize that it is one of your most important priorities as a sales manager.

4-7: You're getting there. You may have the right mindset but not the right coaching approach. Or your approach to coaching might be in the right place, but you don't have the tools to take it to the next level.

7-10: Well done! Coaching is a continual process, and there's always room for improvement. Be on the lookout for ways to take your coaching to the next level and consider using a platform that makes sales coaching easy and effortless.



About vPlaybook

Cut through the noise and give sales reps what they need with vPlaybook - one sales enablement platform for sales conversation prep and coaching activities. Our platform is built around digital sales playbooks – interactive guides consisting of video, content, and strategies focused exclusively on preparing sales reps to be successful in the calls, meetings, and presentations that they will encounter. We built vPlaybook to provide what every team focused on improving sales performance needs.

To learn more about coaching & conversation prep in vPlaybook and to see examples of real sales playbooks, visit www.vplaybook.io

