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Management may be at fault when sales stars' work dims

Lack of motivation, training can lead to lower performance level

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#)

Why do so many sales stars slowly fade into mediocrity and become a worry for their managers? It happens to salespeople at any age and can occur in any organization.

We're not talking about people who are struggling to be successful but rather proven top producers who no longer are in the top ranks.

The common belief is they have a complacent attitude or lost their individual commitment or energy.

It's important, however, to consider a few other possibilities, such as unfulfilled expectations; lack of promotional opportunities, motivation or appreciation; and boredom.

After interviewing, coaching and talking to hundreds of top producers through the years, I've come up with ways that managers and organizations are at fault.

- Unfilled expectations are probably the No. 1 cause of underproducing. There are many reasons for this, but employers who oversell the job and the opportunity are the most common.

With the increasing shortage of experienced talent, it's easy for optimistic managers to paint the most positive picture possible to entice a strong candidate. Because the anticipated promotion never comes or commissions are exaggerated, disappointment and complacency set in.

In smaller organizations, ambitious producers take casual conversations about company stock, becoming a partner or other incentives seriously.

Be clear and realistic from the beginning to reduce this problem.

- The employer's unwillingness to tell a high producer they simply don't qualify for promotion is common. They commonly hear, "Just hang in there," or "Your time will come."

Because there are no clear guidelines for promotion, frustration and impatience tend to intensify. Managers must be comfortable clearly discussing required competencies and attributes that lead to promotions for all positions.

Many performance reviews on top performers exacerbate the problem because managers tend to rate everything high when sales are good or only sales performance is rated.

The lack of realistic feedback keeps the salesperson from identifying what he or she needs to change or improve to qualify for promotion. In short, the company doesn't have a clear advancement program for their sellers.

In some organizations, there are simply no positions available for promotion. A common solution is to design new challenges and responsibilities to keep top talent, such as key account reps or specialty reps, motivated and engaged.

- Many highly touted motivation and recognition programs are actually demotivating.

Consider that in many organizations, the 80/20 rule prevails. That means 20 percent of the sales force generates 80 percent of the business. Of course, the top producer needs distinction, but those who come close should get something. What will be the attitude of the No. 2 and No. 3 producers who receive little reward?

Contests are a good example. When one or two contenders emerge in a race, there's risk that the rest of the team will stop running. It's better to have a contest where everyone wins as long as each participant reaches a certain goal. Consistency is what's important in selling, and these sellers need consistent reward too.

- Some sales jobs can become boring over time. Boredom is especially common in route sales, where representatives repeatedly call on the same base of accounts. It's the organization's and the managers' responsibility to keep the job interesting with new programs, new products and new customers. At a minimum, mix up territories, switch accounts or assign new responsibilities.
- Many seasoned top producers just don't feel appreciated. Studies show the No. 1 reason customers leave is lack of appreciation, and top sellers often leave or become complacent for the same reason.

It's common practice to promote the young fast-trackers. Some young managers privately admit feeling intimidated by the experience and knowledge of senior people. The answer is to train managers and organizations to take advantage of the vast expertise of their proven producers. Ask them for input, involve them in decisions and show appreciation. They can be invaluable mentors.

Complacency doesn't usually occur because of some character flaw in top producers. It usually occurs because of something that happened or something that didn't.

As a manager, be realistic in discussing future opportunities, define a clear set of competencies in addition to good sales that are required for promotion, check your incentive program and use your greatest motivator regularly: Show your appreciation and be open in your communication.

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