

## FROM PERFORMER TO COACH

In the professions of dancing, music, sports, and acting, as in selling, it is not uncommon to see someone who moves eventually from 'performing' into teaching. In the first four professions it seems a natural enough progression and performers generally welcome someone with experience, especially if that experience was successful. The best of those teachers eventually graduate to become professional coaches, and again, it is not unusual to hear professional performers extol the virtues and merits of their coaches, especially when those performers are receiving awards or accolades. This is, however, with the notable exception of salespeople who appear from my research to have a less than charitable view of their managers.

In selling, there's a phrase that is often used - *"Those who can, do. Those who cannot, teach. Those who can't teach, administrate"*. There is an attitude of mind in selling that training is a soft option. The way to corporate fame and success is through the sales management channel. This attitude fails to realise the power and strength of sales coaching. It is primarily because of this attitude that many of the best potential sales coaches never consider joining the profession of coaching in the first place. Sometimes the average performing salesperson is moved into the training department rather than the best salesperson. It underlines the confusion and misunderstanding that there exists between coaching and training. In the vast majority of sales forces, the way that a salesperson most often moves from a selling role into a potential coaching role is via promotion. On Friday evening the best salesperson in the team leaves work to resurface, almost butterfly-like on Monday morning into what used to be a sales management role, but now in many companies is called coaching.

We have heard for the last twenty years that the skills needed to be a successful salesperson are not necessarily the skills needed to be a successful sales manager. However, the practice of promoting salespeople into management positions on the assumption that because they were good at selling they will be good at sales management continues unabated. That's not to say that assessment, development, and selection processes have not replaced the *'tap on the shoulder'*. It is however only cosmetic. I have been on enough selection panels and met enough salespeople turned sales manager to know that the *"tap on the shoulder"* still exists but the process now takes longer. The game of objectivity still has to be played but the outcomes are the same. It usually starts by someone saying, *"Look, you can have who you want. It's just that we have to go through this to make it appear fair"* No wonder so many new sales managers fail at the first hurdle. The pain of this failure is most acutely suffered by the poor unfortunates in the sales team who have to pay the consequences of an untrained sales manager. By the time the average sales manager has built up some semblance of sales success they have left behind them battalions of sales casualties. I should know – I was that sales manager.

And now? Now sales managers are supposed to be coaches. Yet I see as much preparation for this role as there generally has been for sales management, with about the same level of success. In the fields of sports, dance, music and the theatre, the job of the coach is clearly defined, understood, and respected. In simple terms, the role of the coach is to elicit the best performance possible from his or her charges. They have no other function. In the world of selling, this coaching role is completely misunderstood and expectations are simply not realistic. Many *'coaches'* have a variety of responsibilities of which coaching is merely one. If coaches have additional responsibilities such as: -

- Personal sales targets
- HR responsibilities
- Administrative duties
- Budgeting

then they are not and never will be effective sales coaches. Being a sales coach is a full

time occupation. The sales coach has to be able to concentrate on and dedicate their time to the following areas: -

- Creating and selling a successful vision of the future
- Creating a positive learning environment in which the team feels free to experiment
- Making time available for everyone to learn and to practise
- Reinforcing positive behaviours
- Planning a long-term skills strategy for success

In 1992, I completed a coaching programme delivered by David Hemery (of Gold Medal Fame) and Susan Kaye. With ten of my colleagues I had just scaled a wall, which stretched endlessly skyward, or was it really only fourteen feet high? '*Scaling*' implies some kind of professional approach, when in fact most of us, men and women, had been hauled over the wall quite unceremoniously. It was at the end of three long days, where we had climbed mountains, crossed ravines, walked along dangerous obstacles, and care-freely thrown ourselves from great heights into the waiting arms of companions. Our journey was along the '*Challenge of Excellence*' during which our course had sparked our imagination, stimulated our desire to succeed, and watered the seeds of our greatness. It was David who first told me about the seed of greatness. He believes that each one of us has that seed within us. On completing the Challenge of Excellence, whilst my sense of achievement knew no bounds, I was unsure about the greatness of the seed. In hindsight, he was right. We all have it. For me it was one of the major milestones in a long project to discover a better way of managing and of training and developing people. I had been working for nearly two years previously, convinced that coaching from the athletic world could be combined with managerial motivational psychology, to form a more effective style of developing and managing salespeople.

The seed of greatness exists for all those who say they can improve, and even within those who say they cannot. Coaching can release that seed, not just for the person being coached, but also for the coach. Coaching has represented for me a model upon which personal performance issues are clearly defined, structured, and acted upon. It could do the same for you, and for the people you seek to develop. It is the missing piece of the development jigsaw.