

Friday, September 26, 2008



Real leaders shine in tough economic times

The Business Journal of the Greater Triad Area - by [Colleen Stanley](#) Contributing writer

Winston Churchill's famous quote, "The price of greatness is responsibility" can be applied to any leadership or management position.

In sales, a top producer often wants move up into management — and with that move comes responsibility. A sales manager is responsible for the personal and professional development of each person on the team. A sales manager is responsible for keeping the team fired up when flames start to diminish. And they're responsible for leading the charge when the sales team might be thinking about leading the retreat.

Good economies hide many business flaws, leadership being one of them. It's in tough economic times that true sales leaders are discovered and poor leaders are discarded. Here are the five C's of great sales leadership during tough economic times.

- **Coaching** — Great sales managers recognize that one more strategy meeting at the corporate office isn't going to affect the salesperson slugging it out in the field. They leave the comfortable rhetoric of meetings to work side by side with the road warrior to evaluate, mentor and coach.

Sometimes the old way of doing things just isn't working, and the salesperson needs a second set of eyes to see a new and better way of acquiring and keeping business.

Field coaching means you meet and greet the fans, your customers, and find out what's really important to them in the way of product, delivery and service. The customer is the real CFO in any organization, and they are the ones signing your paycheck.

- **Competition** — Give thanks for competitors. They keep you from getting complacent — or better yet, they get complacent.

A good economy also covers a lot of sales sins, and now might be the best time to analyze your competitor to see if they have fallen asleep at the wheel. Are they taking clients for granted? Are they delivering only fair service? Is there a gap in their product/service offering?

Now, turn around that scenario and ask yourself the same questions. Your best client is always your competitor's best prospect. Make sure your sales team members are awake and attentive. Check to make sure they haven't caught the disease of complacency. Take care of your best customers — or your competitor will.

- **Communication** — It's time to overcommunicate. Create a forum for your sales team to teach one another best practices for prospecting, client acquisition, overcoming objections and closing deals. Share success stories and war stories, and learn from both. It's as important to duplicate what's working as it is to learn the lessons of what isn't working.

Take the time to communicate appreciation for the teams efforts. Buy cycles often get longer in tough economic times. Make sure you're not just showing appreciation for closed deals. Hand out compliments for execution of consistent sales activity and working hard every day. Six months is a long time to go without a thank-you or thumbs up.

- Conviction — Measure your personal belief in the company and the products/services you sell. If you, as the sales manager, aren't 100 percent sold, there's no way you can lead a sales team to sell, especially in tough times. Check your team members' belief in the company and products/services, and ask the following questions:

Do you want to be in this profession (and sales is a profession)? If the answer is "no," there's no amount of sales training or coaching that cover lack of passion.

Are you sold on what you sell? If the salesperson isn't sold, why should a prospect be sold? Would you buy from you?

- Commitment — At the end of the day, a great sales manager needs to ask just one question of their sales team: Are you willing to do what it takes to succeed? In tough economic times, that means working harder, kicking up the sales activity plan, getting more skillful at sales and persuasion, and building strong partners.

A sales manager can support, educate and encourage a salesperson. What a sales manager can't do is create commitment to excellence and getting the job done. That's a do-it-yourself project accomplished only by the salesperson.

Leadership is a responsibility. Practice the five C's in your role as sales manager. Coach, be competitive, overcommunicate, be convicted and be committed.

Do you have what it takes to lead in tough times?

About the Author

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