Becoming a Great Sales Manager in the IT Industry

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Sales managers in the information technology (IT) industry have a particularly challenging role. There is no other role or industry in which I've been a part that requires so much adaptation, resilience, and shear effort.

For one reason, IT industry products are complex. They are feature rich, require integration, and involve customization. They must work within the extremely complicated IT environments that exist in most organizations.

Compounding product complexity, IT Industry product life cycles are measured in months compared to years in most other industries. Barriers to entry are low creating a constant barrage of new competitors, often with very aggressive pricing, if not outright free offers. Customers are generally sophisticated coming from enterprise organizations with extensive experience in working with IT vendors and know how to leverage and negotiate with suppliers.

Sales managers in these environments typically come from the ranks of the sales superstars. Following a period of sales success based on having technical knowledge and selling skills, they find themselves in a sales management position.

Turnover is generally high in IT sales management making these opportunities more frequent than in more stable environments. New sales managers are immediately given management responsibility and often without any formal training.

In a typical week, sales managers help close the deals in their territory, maintain customer relationships, create new opportunities for their team, review proposals, approve prices, and manage the performance of their sales personnel. They work with their sales reps daily in all stages of the selling process. These activities are in addition to maintaining their sales forecasts and preparing for reviews with senior management.

Sales in the IT industry are tracked yearly, quarterly, monthly, and weekly. There are forecasts, pipeline reviews, key transactions, and key performance metrics which are tracked weekly and in some environments daily.

Unlike other roles inside and outside of the IT industry, the IT sales manager has no downtime. Their world never stops. They can't take time off without checking their voicemail, being on conference calls, checking their email, or being available for the inevitable emergency that comes up. They operate full on and at high intensity.

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For these reasons, I have great respect for the IT sales manager. I have been there myself as a sales rep, sales manager, sales executive, and general manager working in the IT industry for most of my career.

While the money is good, the pace is fun, and the challenge is great, there is a downside. Without intentional resistance, IT sales managers frequently become "machines of execution". They become accustomed to operating on a tactical basis and ignore more strategic matters. They put very little time or investment into their own development. Many have low self-awareness and unknowingly employ flawed habits. Others simply miss out on learning in areas such as thinking strategically and communicating effectively.

This not only impacts the sales manager, but their entire organization. When everyone is focused on the tactical, the strategic gets ignored. All is fine as long as the products are hot, the market is hot, and sales are flowing. Yet when a blip in the system occurs, sales fall quickly and seemingly without notice. Inefficient processes, ineffective systems, poor skills, and other dysfunctions quickly surface as if they just happened. The reality of course is that they were always there. They were just ignored. No one took the time to deal with them. The managers were "too busy".

To be a great sales manager, you have to spend time on strategic matters. You have work through your team. You can't be doing their work for them. If you want to bring the whole level of your team's performance up, you can't merely be the superstar salesman that parachutes into the large deals or into the ones that are going off-track. Not only is this mode of operation not scalable, but you are cheating your customers out of interfacing with better sales people throughout the rest of the sales pursuit. Not to mention you are cheating your employees out of improving their skills to the level at which they need to be operating.

As a sales manager, you are uniquely in the position to have insight into both external and internal issues and opportunities. You are the best person to identify changes needed in processes, products, services, procedures, value propositions, systems, and the skills of sales support personnel. If you don't spend a portion of your time thinking and working in these areas, they will go unresolved until they become sizable problems.

To be the best sales manager you can be, follow these ten best practices of great sales leaders:

1. **Free-up time.** Challenge yourself to free-up time to spend outside of the day-to-day tactical execution of your business. Schedule time on your calendar to be proactive in strategic areas of your business. Don't fall victim to only getting to the urgent and tactical. There are other matters of importance that will derail you if left unattended.
2. **Refine processes.** Use part of your time to provide feedback up the line or in direct refinement of the procedures, processes, systems, measurements, templates, or other areas of your business which enable peak sales performance. Look for opportunities to embed best practices and repeatability into your team's activities.
3. **Coach, don't tell.** Don't fall into the trap of doing the work for your team or telling them what to do. Coach them in doing the work themselves. Learn sales coaching skills and make your default management style one of a great coach, not an individual contributor or task master.
4. **Teach and practice.** Teach, train and test your team. Challenge them to improve their knowledge, skills, and communications. Give them safe opportunities to improve their delivery of your value proposition, objection handling, and other aspects of your selling approach.
5. **Invest in yourself.** Look in the mirror. Consider where you can develop and improve. Keep up with contemporary management practices and best selling practices. Attend seminars, read books, subscribe to newsletters, and seek the wise counsel of others. Don't let yourself become irrelevant due to obsolescence.
6. **Motivate.** Be an inspiration to your team. Use part of your time to be a cheerleader. Encourage your team and praise not only their successes, but their behavior that you want to reinforce. Maintain a climate that promotes a positive can-do attitude and high morale. You are your team's chief cheerleader.
7. **Measure.** Monitor leading indicators of performance, not merely lagging indicators such as sales revenue and bookings. You don't focus on results if you want to impact results. You focus on that which enables results. Don't let poor performance take root. Deal with performance issues quickly. Find its root cause. Put actions and measurements in place to rectify it.
8. **Communicate frequently.** Keep your team involved in the business. Make them feel appreciated by keeping them informed. Seek their opinions and feedback. Be a conduit of communications to them from your upper management. Maintain a steady flow of two-way communications.

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9. **Know your employees.** Get to know your employees as individuals. Learn their interests, strengths, developmental needs, learning styles, and motivational drivers. Lead each of them in the way that best utilizes their uniqueness. Put them in the right roles. Leverage their strengths. Help them develop in their weaker areas and give them support while they're learning.

10. **Have fun.** Sales management in IT is one of the best jobs you can have. Make it fun. Stay positive. Share your success with your team. Celebrate the whole team's successes. Get your team off-site for some team building and skill building. Create a spirit of community. Help your team learn and appreciate the value of helping each other and the enjoyment that comes with it.

Follow these ten principles and become the best sales manager you can be.

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