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The TACTIC: You don't manage salespeople . . .

The STORY: At 7AM on Monday, Paul strode into the conference room and found, as he expected to find, all of this salespeople seated around the table. For the past six months, there had been a steady downslide in monthly sales figures. Worse, the margins were slipping even more.

Most disturbing was the performance of his three top salespeople; while their monthly totals had remained the same, the margins were even worse than his poorest performing salesperson.

As he reached the head of the table, his only thought was that "It's time to kick some butt."

"Okay," started Paul, "the monthly numbers are in for everyone and frankly, I find them hard to believe. We are only headed in one direction, down, down, down."

He looked around the table as he spoke, watching to see if any broke eye contact. Funny he thought, the only one who did was Melinda, his best salesperson.

"Melinda . . ."

"Yes, Paul?"

"You were number one last month, edging out Jennifer and Chris," he said, pausing for a moment, "but your margin has been steadily slipping for three months."

"Paul, I've been trying to tell you for three months, Xerick International is pushing our good clients really hard . . . either we cut margins hard or lose clients some of us have worked years to get."

"I don't think Xerick is the problem at all." Paul watched the looks of amazement and confusion crossing the faces of his salespeople.

"No the problem is right here in this room . . . sales are headed into the toilet because all of you, including The Three," pointing to Melinda, Jennifer and Chris, "don't want to really dig in and accept the new sales ordering procedure. Every order these past three months, every one without exception, has had the paper work incorrectly filled out. We've had group meeting after group meeting about this, what do I have to do? Meet with each of you, individually, like school children?"

The RESULT: Paul believes that he is an effective manager. All of the salespeople attend his meetings, respond in what he feels is an appropriate manner, and yet sales are falling off. He is convinced that the problem has to do with the group's resistance to the new sales ordering procedures.

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The TACTIC: You don't manage salespeople . . .

DISCUSSION: Paul has fallen into the trap of believing that he can “manage” group behavior. Worse, he is convinced that group behavior exists.

Assume for the moment that all of the salespeople are resistant to the new sales ordering procedures. Does this mean that the resistance is at the same level for each sales person? Does this mean that each salesperson views each component of the new sales ordering procedure in the same manner? In other words, everyone feels step two is bad and step three is good? And does everyone have the same feeling when the term “bad” is used? Or for that matter, does “good” mean the same thing to each person?

In the above paragraph, it's obvious that each individual has his or her unique viewpoint of the new sales ordering procedure. Since each person has a unique viewpoint, how can Paul come up with one management solution that will work for each person? He can't. But he doesn't see that and will spend hours trying, only to be further frustrated while sales head downward.

APPROACH: The most difficult step in managing individual salespeople is recognizing when you are trying to manage the group instead. Do you see each salesperson as an individual or do you see him only as part of the sales department? Do you find yourself saying, “If only they all . . .”, then you are seeing them as a group.

First, know when you are falling into the trap of trying to manage group behavior. Once you find yourself doing it, stop. You'll never get anywhere anyway and will waste a lot of time trying.

Second, each salesperson should have established, with your individual management, written goals and written behaviors to reach those goals. While some goals and behaviors will be common across the sales force, others will be unique to that individual. You “manage” his behaviors which have been designed to help him reach his goals.

Third, never miss an opportunity to congratulate a salesperson for successfully completing a behavior you have both agreed to, regardless of whether it leads to a sale or not. Remember, you manage individual behavior, not sales. Sales will happen if the behaviors are done!

THOUGHT: You don't manage salespeople . . . you manage individuals, and with each individual, the most you can ever manage is individual behavior.

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