

Changes in attitude

Don't let your salespeople play the 'blame game'

Question:

I've inherited a sales team that blames everything and everyone for their poor performance. I'd like to change their focus from blame to accountability. Is it realistic to think I can negotiate a change in their attitude?

Response:

Attitude is a matter of choice. And yet, poor leadership can deflate a team's attitude so dramatically, they perform well below their capabilities.

Research confirms what we already know, that a leader's moods are contagious. If a leader is negative, the team's attitude will suffer. If the leader is optimistic and realistic, and focused on strategically driving business growth, team members will inspire to achieve greatness.

Robert Frost said, "The brain is a wonderful organ; it starts working the moment you get up and doesn't stop until you get to work." Clearly he recognized what a powerful influence leadership has on personal effectiveness.

While you can't undo what's already been done, you can approach this by seeing your team as part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

To begin the process, schedule a team meeting, preferably offsite, so you create a relaxed atmosphere. Send out an agenda a week in advance so everyone knows what to expect. Plan a nice dinner the night before, so team members can connect with you and one another on a personal level.

On the following day, begin the meeting by communicating your vision of what you would like to see the team accomplish this year. Be specific so they can see the vision in their minds eye – describe the new accounts you see them landing, the new markets they've penetrated, the incremental revenue streams and/or gross profit margin increases they've achieved.

At this point, if you have been using PowerPoint, shut off the projector. Then transition to the next topic – your observations about their attitude and work habits. Be mindful of your tone of voice. You want to present your observations in a factual manner and not come across as overly critical or demeaning since that will only serve to alienate them. Consider saying the following:

"Now I'd like to talk with you about my observations of you as a team. I've had the opportunity to work with each of you in the field, and it's clear to me that you all want to be successful. We share that in common – I too, want you to be successful.

"We have a lot working in our favor for this to be a reality. The market is rich with opportunities. We have new initiatives designed to expand our business. We have some great trade shows coming up in the next few months and we have some good prospects in the pipeline.

"The one area that may limit our success is the blame-game attitude that's prevalent. During my territory visits, each of you spent a fair amount of time posting blame for your lack of performance. From my perspective, when we post blame, we render ourselves powerless. If our brain is filled with excuses about why we can't do something, then it can't focus on what we can do. Therefore, we give up our control to identify and implement a solution.

"It has been my experience that in every economy there are salespeople and

sales teams, who succeed. It's my expectation that we will be one of those teams this year, and I need your support and commitment that you're on board with this vision so we make that happen."

At this point, you've set the stage. Next, you want to lay out a plan for making them accountable. I've developed a six-step, trademarked process called the C.A.P.A.B.L.E. Career Advancement Process. This manageable system provides both managers and sales personnel with a clear step-by-step process for managing their career success. The steps are as follows:

Clarify performance expectations

After the team meeting, schedule one-on-one meetings with each team member to discuss their performance expectations. Review the activities, behaviors and results they are accountable for achieving. Be sure they understand how to translate these expectations into an action plan.

Once you both have reached a clear understanding, put the performance expectations in writing. It will be helpful to refer back to these points during check-point debriefing discussions.

Assess competencies

Next, assess their capability to achieve the stated results. In other words, mutually determine if they possess the knowledge, skills and experience to achieve the desired results.

Participate in training

If the salesperson is lacking capability in an area(s), define the required training, and determine how and when they will receive that training. Develop a timeline so you both understand the expectations moving forward.

Ask for feedback

Feedback is the mechanism that sup-

ports “right” decisions. Through feedback, sales team members gain clarity about what they are doing well, where they need to redirect their attention, and areas where they need to improve their effectiveness. Louis Lundborg, former chairman of Bank of America stated, “Success . . . My nomination for the single-most important ingredient is energy well-directed.”

As part of the accountability implementation plan, you must advise each team member that they are expected to initiate feedback discussions with you. This is not in lieu of you initiating feedback based on your observations and their results, but they are responsible for scheduling meetings (phone or face-to-face) to update you on their successes, challenges and proposed solutions for resolving issues.

Be accountable

Communicate to each employee that they must take ownership for their results. Define what they can expect from

you. For example, you will: follow through with your commitments, be accessible for answering questions and will provide coaching and support to assist them through a difficult situation.

They too must take accountability. They are responsible for: identifying areas where they need improvement/training/coaching; seeking input when a situation is confusing or high risk; taking ownership of results – good and bad; and will follow through on commitments.

Learn expected consequences

You may determine over time that some team members are not strategically suited to the position or your business. When effort is made to enhance the salesperson’s results without success, it may be necessary to terminate the employee. Employees outgrow their companies just as companies outgrow their employees. Every employee should know early in the process, the impending consequences if they fall short of the desired performance

expectations. Making the tough decisions is critical for achieving a high performance team.

Your responsibility as a sales manager is to position your team for success, not failure. This requires clearly communicating expectations, providing emotional support and following-through on a timely basis. When they reclaim their power by taking ownership for their personal performance, they will either step into their performance potential or self-terminate. In either situation, you will be creating the foundation for a high-performing sales team.



Christine McMahon is president of Christine McMahon & Associates, a Milwaukee firm dedicated to advancing sales productivity and effectiveness. She can be reached at: ccm@christinemcmahon.com, or by calling her at: (414) 290-3344.