



An EcSell Institute White Paper

# Sales Coaching Research Series:

Practical Ideas to Develop Your Sales Coaching Skills

Part 1: Building Trust

## Building Better Trust

The truly successful sales leader understands the importance of a strong relationship with their sales team. When strong relationships are present, the team culture is healthy and positive and the by-product is often increased productivity. One key component to a strong team is having a partnership where trust is present and honesty is promoted. When an honest relationship is rendered, both the sales rep and the sales manager benefit. There is confidence in what each party is bringing to the partnership and the outcomes that will result. While there are many clichés about the ease at which trust is broken, a relationship of trust is something that can also be built and sustained.

Here, we examine the sales manager behaviors that are most closely connected to sales rep trust. In doing so, we gain a better understanding of the areas for focus for sales leaders who would like to take steps to creating more trust and honesty with their sales reps. This paper identifies six behaviors that correspond most highly to sales reps with high levels of trust with their sales manager. Additionally, we discuss practical applications that can be implemented by managers throughout the sales profession.

## Through the Eyes of the Rep Survey Data

We use data gathered by the EcSell Institute as part of the Through the Eyes of the Sales Rep Survey (TTEOTR) to explore the concept of honesty and trust in the sales manager/sales rep relationship. TTEOTR is a web-based survey administered to sales reps of EcSell member organizations. The purpose of this survey is to gather data about experiences and beliefs from the sales rep regarding coaching behaviors carried out by their sales manager. The survey is comprised of a total of 67 items with this analysis using the responses of almost 600 sales reps. At the conclusion of the substantive questions carried in the survey, three additional questions were asked for research purposes only. One of these research items asks the sales rep to indicate how closely their responses to the previous items match their true opinions and experiences. This item is used to measure the sales rep's level of honesty when completing the survey and as a proxy for the trust viewed by the rep towards their manager. Rep responses were then placed into one of two groups: sales reps who indicated the highest levels of trust towards their sales manager and those who indicated moderate to low levels of trust. The mean item scores were then ranked from highest to lowest for those reps with the highest levels of manager trust. By doing this, we can examine the strongest behaviors of managers who are highly trusted by their reps.

## Findings

In this analysis, we examine the behaviors of managers who are most trusted by their sales reps. This exploration helps us better understand the behaviors that play the strongest role in creating a trusting sales leadership relationship. Here, we discuss the findings based on the six behavioral variables that were scored the highest for the group of reps that indicate the highest levels of honesty, or trust, when completing the TTEOTR survey. This research allows us to examine and discuss the strongest behaviors of highly trusted sales managers. A discussion of each behavior is included here as well as in Figure 1 below.

### 1. Hold Sales Reps Accountable

The strongest behavior held by sales managers who are highly trusted by their sales reps centers on their practice of holding their sales reps accountable to their sales goals. These managers see the importance of giving their sales reps clear goals and guidelines for what it means to be successful in their sales position. Even more critically, the managers here complete this process by following-up with their reps to assess and provide feedback in regards to these goals. In this two-part process (identifying goals followed by assessing goal attainment with the rep) the manager demonstrates a level of commitment to the rep's success. Creating goals and completing progress checks can foster a sense of trust with sales reps as it helps them understand the

expectations placed upon them. Additionally, formal goals help reps understand the ramifications of their meeting, exceeding, or missing designated outcomes.

*What you should do:*

Use written goal setting exercises to coordinate expectations between you and your sales reps. Revisit these goals regularly (such as during 1:1 meetings) and provide direct feedback when they are met as well as when they are not met.

## 2. Possess Strong Client Closing Skills

Sales reps indicate that they hold more trust in sales managers who exhibit strong closing skills. The trust developed with this behavior comes from confidence in the abilities of the manager to do what is being asked of the rep. Managers bring credibility to their role by showing prowess at completing the sales process. In other words, sales reps are more likely to trust the process and advice of sales leaders who are able to close client deals in a successful way.

*What you should do:*

Sales reps want to be successful. When you demonstrate a pathway for success in your own sales interactions, the guidance you offer as a sales leader is seen as more trustworthy.

## 3. Recognize and Reward Sales Rep Achievements

In the world of sales, performance is often assessed at the individual level. Reps who were successful in their individual sales role are often promoted into overseeing the performance of a group. This paradigm shift from viewing achievement as an individual performance to now a group endeavor can be a challenging adjustment for many sales leaders. As a byproduct, the tendency to take credit for the work done by those they lead is an easy misstep for many sales managers. Sales reps may begin to view managers as untrustworthy when they perceive the recognition and rewarding of performance as not being acknowledged in a realistic manner.

*What you should do:*

Never downplay or mislabel the contributions of those of your sales team. Regardless of the size of the accomplishment, make sure to give credit and recognition.

## 4. Frequently Hold 1:1 Meetings With Sales Reps

We often do not trust what we do not know. One of the most basic ways that a relationship of trust can be built is through familiarity. By simply spending time together, sales reps and managers learn more about each other. As a sales rep grows in experience with their sales leader's tendencies, so will their trust or distrust of their sales leader. For example, as a rep gains experience in the ways a manager communicates and provides guidance, they may be more likely to trust how and what a manager is saying. Keep in mind that a sales manager's track record for keeping, rescheduling, or missing 1:1 meetings also deeply impacts trust.

*What you should do:*

Regularly hold 1:1 meetings with your reps. Use these interactions as an opportunity to develop a personal relationship, establish communication styles, and lay a foundation for mutual respect.

## 5. Excel At Identifying Client Needs

The investment into understanding the needs, fears, personalities, and desires of your reps is just as important as understanding these aspects of your clientele. As a manager, you should keep in mind that your most important customers are the individuals on your sales team. Rather than buying a product or service, think of your reps as buying into your leadership abilities. Each member of your sales team is a unique individual. As such, sales reps have unique and individual needs when it comes to how you lead them in your sales management position. Many sales managers have been promoted into their roles because of their ability to identify their customer's

needs. Once in a managerial position, this skill often fails to transition to the new role. Instead, take advantage of this talent and use it to better navigate the needs, fears, motivators, desires, and personalities of your team members. Sales reps see the effort that goes into understanding the needs of a client and respond when that same level of effort is exerted upon them.

*6. What you should do:*

Use your sales skills to explore how best you could meet these needs similarly as you would if they were a client. Think of your role as one of winning over their trust and respect rather than them needing to simply fall in line behind your title.

Treat Sales Reps As Valuable Team Members

This final behavior is not a surprise member on our list of best practices for highly trusted sales managers: treat your sales reps as valuable team members rather than subordinates. Sales reps instill more trust into their sales manager when they are treated as an important piece of their sales team's success. By listening to your reps, you are showing that you value their experiences. When you implement ideas or address concerns, reps see that it is safe to share what is going on in their world. A safe environment is one where trust can abide and where reps feel like they matter.

*What you should do:*

The role of a sales manager is not just to push information, goals, and directives down to their reps but to also pull ideas, challenges, and best practices up from their reps. Make sure the movement of communication is not a one-way street. Respect the vantage point of your reps just as you would like them to respect yours.

Figure 1. Trusted Sales Manager Behaviors



## Summary

Our research demonstrates that specific sales manager behaviors can promote higher levels of trust and honesty within the sales manager/sales rep relationship. By examining the highest mean scores for those reps who indicate the highest levels of trust when discussing their relationship with their sales manager, six specific behaviors emerge as most impactful.

As discussed above, these behaviors have solid practical applications that are universal to sales managers. Managers who already hold a relationship of trust with their reps can look to these behaviors as places to continue making efforts and areas to be mindful of when new sales reps are brought onto the team.

For more information regarding the information found in this white paper or the EcSell Institute, please contact us at:

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## About The Author



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Stacia Jorgensen brings an array of experiences in data collection and analysis to EcSell Institute as the Director of Research. She has over 13 years of experience running a non-profit academic research organization and has expertise in both qualitative and quantitative data collection methodologies. She specializes in collaborating with clients to meet the data needs of their specific sales team while providing information that is easy to use and understand.



EcSell Institute provides strategies for continuous improvement by showing our members how to apply the latest research, technology, and best practices in leadership and sales coaching, and by involving them in a network of the top sales management minds. Why? Because we know that improving a sales manager's ability to coach and lead has the biggest impact on sales team results.

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