

The Sales Manager's Dilemma: Stuck in the Middle



Jeb Brooks



THE BROOKS GROUP



THE SALES MANAGER'S DILEMMA.

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For information, address:

The Brooks Group
3810 North Elm Street
Suite 202
Greensboro, NC 27455, USA.

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FIRST EDITION

Designed by Dawn Mitchell

ISBN 978-0-9717856-0-1

This book is dedicated to the team at
The Brooks Group. Your passion for supporting
our clients carries them – and us – forward.
Thank you.



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Acknowledgments

This book would not exist without two people. First, my father and our firm's founder, Bill Brooks (1945-2007). He laid the foundation that my brother, Will, and I have had the good fortune to build upon in our work here at The Brooks Group. It was his efforts to help sales organizations and sales professionals get the respect they deserve that allowed this book to become real.

Secondly, my colleague Corrie Lisk-Hurst truly brought structure, form, and function to the ideas contained here. As you read this book, remember that it's her brilliance and insight that link together the pages.

I would also like to thank all of the contributors. I'm grateful to Will Brooks, Michelle Richardson, Anita Greenland, Tony Smith, Chris Trevey, Richard Smith, Jon Parenteau, Kirk Zambetti, Trevor O'Sullivan, John Grinnell, Sean Kenny, and everyone else who took time to discuss this book and its contents.



Preface

Are you responsible for leading front-line sellers? If so, this book is for you. Whether the salespeople you lead work directly with buyers or through channel partners, many of the challenges you face are addressed in these chapters.

Every year for the past 40 here at The Brooks Group, we've worked with thousands of sales managers. That means we have seen virtually every potential task, test, and trial a sales manager could face. We've learned a great deal about what makes them successful (and sometimes, not so successful).

However, there's one challenge – I'd call it a dilemma – you face that's greater than all of the others. It's finding the balance between “corporate” and “the field.” How can you serve your boss and your team at the same time? How do you satisfy what the “higher-ups” need while at the same time keeping their demands from distracting your salespeople?

On the one hand, you have to deliver results for your leaders. You have to make the number. You have to ensure compliance. You have to participate in meetings.

On the other hand, you understand the struggles your team face, even if your leadership may not seem to “get it.” You see your sales rep's daily rejections. You understand the realities of customer complaints. You feel the pressure of being stuck in the middle.

This book aims to help you find that balance.

In the final analysis, your responsibility is to the person or people to whom you report (as long as your personal moral compass isn't violated). But sales managers who serve their teams are the ones who are remembered and ultimately make the biggest difference.

I've attempted to cover much of what the role of sales manager entails; however, it's impossible to address every aspect of such a vast career, especially in a book. If you'd like to explore more, I encourage you to consider signing up for one of our sales management programs. The true value of these sessions comes not only from our extremely knowledgeable and experienced facilitators, but also from your fellow sales managers, whose collective wisdom drives discussion. For more about these sessions, head to our website at TheBrooksGroup.com.

Look, if it were an easy job, everyone would do it. Leading salespeople is one of the most challenging management roles in any organization. Congratulations for taking it on!

It's my sincere hope that this book will help you become an even better sales leader by making your balancing act a lot easier.

Jeb Brooks
Greensboro, NC, USA



— Part 1 —

On Your Mark!



Sales Management Is an Essential Role

It's hard to be a sales manager. And nobody knows how true that is more than you! Sales management is one of the most difficult, least glorious jobs out there. The demands on sales managers are tremendous, largely because you're actually on two teams: You lead the sales team, and you're also a member of a management or executive team. You're frequently pulled between competing requirements of the two roles you're in. You're stuck in the middle. That's the bad news.

The good news is that if you've willingly signed up for the role, you are likely someone who:

- Values leadership,
- Wants to be part of seeing others grow,
- Feels energized by giving back, and
- Is able to get results through people.

If that really does describe you, your unique traits will help you learn the management, coaching, and other practical skills that can — and will — make your job easier, help your people achieve their potential, and get the dollar results your company requires.

In this book, we're going to address the biggest challenges you face, giving you tools and techniques that will help you hire, coach, and manage your team. Plus, we'll show you some ways to get the support and engagement of other departments, like marketing, engineering, and service, as well as executive leadership.

You know that sales is a process. If your reps follow a series of linked, sequential steps consistently, they'll probably find success. Unfortunately, sales management is not a process. It's dynamic, and you must flex to address whatever comes your way in the moment. We're going to give you tools, techniques, and even an overarching strategy to help address this challenge.

What Sales Managers Think They Need

Here are a few of the complaints I've heard from sales managers like you in our sales management training programs. Maybe you've felt this way at some point, too?

- I'm "meetinged" to death.
- I'm never accomplishing anything.
- All I do is deal with angry customer complaints.
- Our products are just commodities.
- I'm always being pushed to grow revenue.
- I inherited a bad team and don't have time or energy to deal with it.
- I am inundated with technology.
- I'm under pressure to "save the deal" all the time.
- We are awful at hiring salespeople.
- I need my people to be more proactive and less reactive.
- My team just isn't reaching goal consistently.
- We have so many service issues, it's hard for my team to sell.
- It's hard to influence people when I don't have any real authority.
- These millennials are so hard to manage.
- These old-timers are retired in place.
- Nobody inside our company "gets" sales; there's no support, just resistance at every turn.
- I just can't seem to get consistent performance out of the team as a whole — I need everyone to be at least an average performer.
- I've got sales reps who need to change, but just aren't willing to!
- I feel like I'm herding cats all the time...it's so hard to stay focused.
- My sales reps need to get much better at negotiating — they're constantly just cutting price.
- It's hard to let a salesperson flail and fail when revenue is on the line.
- Why are my sales reps just reacting to customer demands, instead of building interest proactively? Why can't the sales rep be the trigger instead of waiting for the customer?
- I really wish we had a system so that salespeople (and me!) aren't handling service calls all the time.

- My team is terrible at upselling and cross-selling. They leave so much money on the table — or give it to our competitor(s).
- Our distributors are always asking for discounts...when they rarely sell our product anyway.
- Our manufacturer doesn't understand what it's like out here in the field.

And then there's the perennial favorite. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard this...well, I'd have a lot of dollars:

“I just don't have enough hours in the day.”

Lack of Time Is a SYMPTOM

Everything about time is frustrating to the sales managers we work with. You are pressed for time every day, with endless paperwork and meetings, many of which have nothing to do with your daily responsibilities. Add to that demands from corporate level — being told things like, “We need to grow at 7%,” when the market is only growing at 2%. Then, you've got your salespeople, the renegades who plow ahead and the timid mice who need you to solve every problem.

One of our clients recently conducted a time study of their sales team, and they found that more than 65% of their sales managers' time is being spent away from activities related to leading their sales teams. 65%! But we'd wager that percentage is even higher in some organizations. Why? Because sales managers aren't investing their time in the highest gain activities that really enable them to coach their sales teams to get those stellar results management is requiring.

Instead of serving as the captain of a ship, they're bailing water.

Sales Management Truth

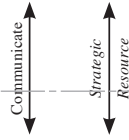
The best sales managers maximize their time with their teams.
They minimize the time they spend on other activities.

As we see it, though, a lack of time is really the most obvious symptom of the real problem sales managers face: the dynamic, hub role they play. As a sales manager, you are responsible for communication both up to corporate and down to your sales team. You're also ideally serving as a strategic resource for those people up and down the organization chart from you. You are in the midst of a thousand messages, ideas and issues, having to choose:

- a) what and how messages get relayed down across your sales team, and
- b) what and how to communicate with executive leadership about issues affecting your sales team and their ability to reach “the number.”

The Sales Manger's Role(s)

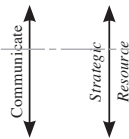
Corporate



Get Ready

Get Set

Go



Field

What's Different about Being a Sales Manager versus Any Other Middle Manager?

Only in the role of sales do you have competitors external to your organization. Engineering and finance are measured in relation to internal factors — measures like quality, accuracy, and delivery. Sales is measured on internal factors, too, like properly submitted orders, playing “nice” with others inside the organization, following procedures, and so on. But your sales team’s performance is ALSO measured by the market against external factors outside of your control.

No other functional area bears as much responsibility for the financial health of the company as sales does. But frequently, in spite of shouldering that burden, the sales department has its hands tied — by quality and delivery issues, by waiting for new product collateral and samples, by customer service problems, and of course, by demands to meet that all-important “number.” You know, the one you have to meet to keep the company profitable?

These problems are especially challenging in the world of OEMs and other manufacturers who sell through distributor networks. In those organizations, it’s even more difficult for senior leaders to make an impact on sales results, because sales are made by external dealers. This can lead to frustration with distributors and their salespeople.

At the same time sales is at the mercy of every other department in the company, in a unique way, it must be aligned productively with other organizational silos — driving collaboration with:

- Marketing, which needs to be rewarded for contribution to your funnel
- Service, which needs to be rewarded for client retention
- Product development, which needs to respond to trends in the field

Being a great sales manager, or even a very good one, requires that you serve as the hub of a vast network of stakeholders. You must be able to select what messages get passed along through you, and how — both up, down, and laterally within your organization, and sometimes with your customers. You must be able to drive progress toward reaching that “number” by engaging your sales team and other resources effectively in service of your company’s mission or vision.

Again, you have a hard job!

Ensuring You Have a Sales Culture

Yes, you lead a sales team and yes, you’re on a management/executive team. Which comes first? For you, it should always, always be SALES! Your reason for existing, organizationally, is to get results through your sales team. At the proverbial end of the day, hitting that number is the primary priority you have; if you don’t meet it, everyone is in jeopardy.

In spite of the reality that a successful sales effort is central to the success of any organization that sells anything, there are so many other ways a company might choose to define itself in the broadest sense: brand, marketplace demands, customer base, competitors, history, expertise, competencies, infrastructure, and so on. As a general rule, organizations have a primary orientation toward one of the following:

- marketing
- sales
- distribution
- service
- operations
- manufacturing
- administration
- research and development
- engineering
- hospitality

Many organizations don’t know what they are oriented toward, and have either a) a climate of competing cultures among different departments, or b) a tacit culture everyone orients themselves toward without being conscious of it. If you’re one of the lucky few whose entire company is oriented toward sales, wonderful! After all, without sales to customers, where would your organization be?

If your organization is otherwise focused, don’t lose hope. It is possible for you to lead an effective sales culture within your department, focusing on serving the client to drive revenue. The more you can remain focused on that goal and develop your team

to reach it, the more likely you are going to be to get the support of other functional areas and develop or maintain the professional clout that will smooth your way in managing up and managing down.

Now, over years of observation, we've found that there is a selection of specific factors that must be present or developed for a solid sales culture to flourish in an organization.

1. The sales department must be or have the potential to be profitable.

If there's no profit derived from the sales department, it's hard to justify its existence. A sales effort is only one of many ways to generate revenue. Many organizations operate solely through marketing. Others employ a dealer network. In any event, to have a sales culture, there needs to be a (potentially) profitable sales effort in place already.

2. The entire enterprise must realize — and believe — that it could not stand solely on its own without a proactive sales effort.

“Nothing happens until something gets sold,” the old saying goes. And it's true. Everyone must realize that nothing moves until the widget gets sold.

3. The sales department must be championed by a well-placed set of internal constituencies that support the sales effort without equivocation.

The best-case scenario occurs when these internal constituencies are in the C-Suite. It's important for the “top” to have come from sales. For example, if a CEO “carried a bag” at one time in his or her career, it's a lot easier to successfully construct a sales culture.

4. The sales department must be led by respected managers and have performance standards that exceed even the most demanding standards of other departments.

People respect others who are held to the same standards as they are. It's hard for everyone to respect a sales department with lax expectations. If, on the other hand, salespeople are expected to work harder than their colleagues in other departments, a natural outcome is respect — even admiration!

5. Members of the sales department must interface with other departments favorably.

Put tritely, “everyone needs to play well together.” Aggressiveness is rewarded in sales. However, it can be a very unfortunate trait within an organization when different people or departments practice it on each other. Organizations with sales cultures ensure their sales teams understand that there are times to be accommodating.

6. The sales department must bring collateral value to the enterprise.

More than just sales volume, the department must contribute to the overall organizational goals. The sales department should enrich the entire team. Smart companies know that salespeople offer a valuable voice to questions like how to improve tactical marketing, ways to enhance customer service, and even what new products to develop.

7. The members of the sales department must mesh culturally with enterprise standards of performance, decorum, and behavior.

We have a client whose salespeople visit the home office only two to three times per year...as a rule, the office is a quiet, reserved operation and workers are protective of their property and offices. It's critical that the VP of Sales reminds the salespeople of this protocol during their visits.

8. The sales department must be made up of competent, capable, high-performance-oriented people.

Sales is too important to allow incompetent, uncaring, or poor-performing salespeople to languish too long. Everyone in the sales department must be committed to working hard and smart. That means the sales culture should reward performance and results, not activity.

In most of our client organizations, some of these factors are weak or even missing entirely. It's a pretty common state of affairs. Even if *your* company faces challenges, if you are personally well positioned within it, you can be an influencer in shifting the focus of your organization to be more sales-oriented. You can do this not just by improving the quality of sales hires and increasing performance levels across the sales team, but also by providing more (and more-valuable) information to your company's executive leadership.

Why Coaching Is Essential to Your Dual Role

If you can enable yourself to be intentional about the role you play — looking up and down, organizationally — you will be able to get better results from the team you have, within the time you have. Consider the coach of any professional team. Balancing the demands of the team's owners and the needs of the players is a way of life. You're no different.

Teaching yourself to be a coach (not a manager) to your salespeople will buy you the time to be strategic, which will in turn make you a trusted advisor for your CEO, executive team, and your salespeople themselves.

Don't get us wrong: coaching your salespeople does take effort, and it may seem like you're adding time-consuming hassles to your already busy days. However, by investing your time in coaching and *systematizing* the highest-gain activities —

which you'll learn about as you read through this book — you'll end up with more capable salespeople who reliably fill the pipeline, speak a common sales language, and manage their territories capably to get results.

What Sales Managers Really Need

In 1913, Charles Wilson Hoyt, the director of sales and advertising at George B. Woolson and Company, a publishing company, released a book called *Scientific Sales Management: A Practical Application of the Principles of Scientific Management to Selling*. In this book, which many now consider the first American sales management guidebook, Hoyt said that the sales manager should cooperate with salespeople to increase their efficiency, suggesting that sales managers should work with what was then a “new type” of salesperson: “...one who accepted help from the house...not the one who worked alone and was hostile to sales management assistance.”

This is a critical point in my view — now, more than 100 years after that book was published, there are still people who view sales managers as ineffective and frustrating middle managers whose goal in life is to make things harder for their salespeople. If you are reading this book, you know that is far from the truth: The best sales managers are, as Charles Wilson Hoyt pointed out so long ago, collaborative partners with their salespeople.

Competent salespeople “manage” themselves; your job is to manage their performance. Michael Henry Cohen writes in his book *What You Accept is What You Teach: Setting Standards for Employee Accountability* that employees should be viewed as volunteers or independent agents who ultimately have a choice regarding their own behavior and performance.

As a leader, you can't force anyone to be accountable for their responsibilities, and you can't make them do anything they don't want to do. Your people either have the intrinsic motivation and skills to meet your expectations, or they don't. Your sales management role is to create a work environment that facilitates high performance — that means providing the resources necessary for success, giving clear feedback, and offering coaching where it's needed.

That said, sales managers need to be all of the following, depending on what the day, time, and situation call for:

- Coach
- Communicator
- Leader
- Mentor
- Manager
- Consultant

As I said earlier, sales management is a truly difficult job! I'd guess that maybe 10% of managers can do all of these things — and they are the greats. In today's fast-paced, information-overloaded workplaces, sales managers' ability to collaborate effectively with their sales teams and guide their salespeople to achieve their goals in their given territories is more important — and more difficult — than ever. This book is all about the strategies, techniques, and tools that will help you stay focused on the sales management activities that are most important and urgent, thereby ensuring your team consistently hits their number, this week, this quarter, and this year.

In other words, this book is about helping you get what you want by providing everything you *need* to get there! For now, let me just give you a little teaser about what's coming in the chapters ahead.

Self Awareness

Every sales manager can significantly improve his or her sales management results and reduce stress levels by:

- a) Acknowledging that we must play a variety of roles, from coach to consultant
- b) Learning to recognize when each is called for
- c) Discovering what strengths and capabilities we can uniquely bring to each of the roles

Sales leaders who are self-aware develop high emotional intelligence, and this allows them to influence and motivate individuals and teams. As a sales leader, you must fully understand your people in order to influence them, and in order to do that, you must first be *highly aware of yourself* and your own blind spots. What motivates one person might not apply to others, and self-aware leaders understand this. There's a lot more about the behaviors we exhibit, the motivators that lead us, and the personal skills we bring to our work life throughout this book, but especially in Chapter 4 on hiring and Chapter 9 on coaching.

A Customer-Centric Sales Process

Sales managers need to systematize and train their salespeople on a sales process that's dynamic and flexible. Doing so creates a common language for coaching. It also provides objective ways to identify challenges, measure "in process" results, and coach in real-time. Many processes are INTERNAL, trying to fit customer into process versus process to the customer. I'll describe the IMPACT Selling system we teach in Chapter 6: Training 101.

Defined Recruiting, Selection, and Onboarding Systems

Even in 1913 Charles Wilson Hoyt knew the importance of hiring and onboarding the right people. My apologies for the non-gender-neutral pronouns in this quote from *Scientific Sales Management*, but the intent of his words is strangely timely:

“The wrong sort of sales managers are on a constant lookout for so-called ‘star’ salesmen. They are on the lookout for ready-made, experienced, competent men — the men whom someone else has trained. The [excellent] sales manager realizes his duty lies in systematically training this desired competent man, rather than hunting for such a man whom someone else has trained.”

As you'll see in Chapter 4: Recruiting and Selecting the Right Salespeople, the best salespeople are not born, they're made. If you benchmark the sales role at your unique company, you can then determine who will be likely to succeed in that role — whether they have experience in your industry (or even in sales) at all. The only way to ensure their success once hired is a comprehensive onboarding system that revolves around a dynamic sales process used by the entire sales team.

Meeting Know-How

Collaborating effectively with your sales team requires self-knowledge and knowledge of others — emotional intelligence. It also requires handling the technical management skills associated with your job professionally and efficiently. In particular, it will behoove you to set and stick to a regular cadence of meetings, ranging from one-to-ones and joint calls to full team meetings. I'll write more about all of these in the chapters ahead, especially Chapter 2 on what's required for success as a sales manager and Chapter 9 on coaching.

Improvement in Soft Skills

Speaking of coaching, there's an industry-wide awareness that sales professionals of all types — inside sales BDRs, field sales reps, and sales managers alike — are more successful if they have strong “soft skills.” Research from our partner TTI Success Insights over the past 30 years shows that superior performers possess more highly developed soft skills than other professionals. Soft skills have more to do with who people are, rather than what they know.

Soft skills (also known as competencies or personal skills) are the attitudes, character traits, and interpersonal skills that shape a person's relationship with themselves and others. For many jobs, soft skills are just as important — or more — as technical skills in producing superior performance. Unlike hard skills (or technical skills), which can be learned and perfected over time, soft skills are more difficult to acquire and change. However, with awareness and willingness, they can be developed. See more about this topic in Chapters 4 and 9.

Useful In-Process and End-Process Metrics

When it comes to sales metrics, less is more. Determine which measurements have the most impact on your sales results, and eliminate any that aren't related to high-gain activity. Focus on "In-Process" measurements, which allow you to coach your reps while they are working towards a goal. Do away with the black and white "End-Process" measurements that don't foster growth in a sales team and only really tell you what the end result is. If you measure progress rather than end results, salespeople can learn from experience and are more likely to succeed. I'll discuss this concept a lot more as it relates to forecasting and funnel management (Chapter 7) and coaching (Chapter 9).

Effective Forecasting

Inaccurate forecasting is the result of not knowing how to have the conversations about where a lead really is in the sales process — is this really an opportunity? Our friends at CSO Insights, the research arm of our competitor Miller Heiman, found that the chances of winning at a craps game are higher than managers' ability to accurately make a forecast!

One of our long-time clients, a company that manufactures high-end motor coaches, discovered that a huge part of their inability to create accurate forecasts was that too many leads in the pipeline hadn't been qualified financially beforehand. Once the sales team was trained on a sales process — the first step of which was investigating the prospect to ensure they were fully qualified — the accuracy of forecasting went up significantly. Information about our IMPACT Selling system, which provides a common language for the entire sales team to center on, as well as serves as a built-in forecasting tool, is in Chapter 6: Training 101 and Chapter 7: Forecasting and Funnel Management.

Come on, Jump in!

Sales management is not for the faint of heart. If you're about to turn the page to start delving deeper into the principles and practices of sales management, you are one of the brave ones: You want to be part of seeing others grow, feel energized by getting results through people, are dedicated to improving yourself and your own results, and willing to take the stands that make a difference.