

## Leading in a lockdown



We are certainly in a remarkable period, and one which we will all remember for the rest of our lives. Even in these extreme circumstances though, the Job Purpose of Sales Management hasn't changed – it's still *to achieve sales through others*. The challenges associated with achieving this though are greater than ever before.

For those who are more used to managing Internal sales teams, managing 'at distance' is as different to the norm as it could possibly be. Even for those who normally manage their teams 'at distance' we're now in uncharted territory, since never before have field based sales teams been obliged to work from home 100% of the time without the option of travelling away from the home office to meet customers. The new home working environment will impact on levels of both motivation and engagement.

Influencing levels of motivation and engagement is about using the right leadership behaviours. This edition of *21<sup>st</sup> Sales Management* provides just a few thoughts on what the right leadership behaviours actually are...

### Ensure high role clarity

High role clarity is achieved when a given person understands absolutely what they are expected to achieve – the Outputs, and critically what they need to do in order to achieve these things – the Inputs. Moreover, there is a need to understand the quantity of Inputs required, and more importantly the quality of these things that's required.

Imagine me phoning each of your team and asking the following questions:

- 1) *What's the purpose of your job role?* (i.e. how well do they understand the reason their job role exists?)
- 2) *What are you expected to achieve?* (i.e. how well do they understand what the expected Outputs are?)
- 3) *What activities do you need to do day-to-day in order that your objectives are achieved?* (i.e. do they know what Inputs are required?)
- 4) *How much of each of these activities do you need to do every week in order to achieve your objectives?* (i.e. do they know the quantity required?)
- 5) *How do you differentiate between high, medium and low quality outbound calls / openings to an outbound calls / qualification / concern management, etc.?* (i.e. do they understand how to monitor quality?)

It's questions 3, 4 and 5 that are the important ones, and in particular 4 and 5. Ironically it's these questions that salespeople tend to struggle with most. If each person in your team doesn't know how much they need to do and precisely what quality they need to do these things to (and how to monitor this quality) , how can they be expected to manage themselves at distance?

**Recommendation:** Adopt a coaching style to help each person in the team achieve high levels of role clarity.

## About the author

Tim Royds is director of *highclere*, an organisation that provides bespoke B2B sales consultancy and training solutions in the UK and internationally. He has over 36 years' experience in sales, Sales Management, sales coaching, sales consultancy and sales training. He is also author of the part-published 9-book series "Sales Management..." each of which focuses in on a specific facet of this challenging role.



## Ensure the working week has structure

It's all too easy in the current circumstances for working life and personal / home life to merge into one. The potential consequence of this is burn-out. Not immediately, but a few weeks down the track it begins to happen. Burn-out causes people to feel lethargic and lacking 'get up and go'. Activity levels drop, and levels of happiness and enthusiasm certainly do. All of which is not good for productivity, and at fear of stating the obvious it's not good for the mental health of the individual either. And by the time it's happened it's too late.

**That's why a key responsibility right now is to prevent it happening in the first place.**

So although always important, it's now more important to focus on structure for the working week than ever before...

### Recommendations:

- Begin the week with a video conference team meeting. Ask each person to share their key goals for the week ahead and what they're going to do to make these things happen.
- From week 2 onwards, also ask them to share how well they did against the goals they set themselves for the previous week, and what worked well for them. Put the emphasis on recognising and celebrating successes (not about checking up!). Catch them doing it right!
- Encourage the team to both have a defined beginning and end to the working day so that psychologically there's clarity about when they are in 'work mode' and 'personal time' mode. I've uploaded to YouTube a short video with ideas about different things that can be done to achieve this. Check out [bit.ly/Apr20SalesTip](https://bit.ly/Apr20SalesTip).

## Be authentic

Put your hand up if you're finding the current situation to be easy and 'business as usual' ...without even looking I know you won't have raised your hand! So now we've ascertained we're all in the same boat together, we can be honest about things!

Don't pretend to your team that you're not feeling uncomfortable right now. They know you are, and you know, that they know, that you are! Feeling uncomfortable is not a weakness; it would be unnatural if you didn't feel this way to a greater or lesser degree.

Recognising the challenges of working in a home environment isn't a weakness either – it makes you human. If you're having issues separating work life from home life (if this is the first time you've worked from home, for example), why not share this with the team and open up a discussion about ideas which might help; someone else in the team may have an idea you've not thought of yet.

Remember Professor Robert Kelly being interviewed on BBC news about the situation in South Korea when he had his two young children enter into his study live on air?! Was the audience critical of him and what happened? Actually it was the opposite, and the vast majority of people found themselves endeared to him and his family. That's what being authentic can do for you too.



Not pretending to understand what you can't possibly understand is also being authentic. Are any of your team now confined most of the time to a small flat somewhere in the middle of a city? If you are living in a decent sized house in the countryside with plenty of space around you, then you can't possibly feel the same pressures and stresses. By all means try to understand and empathise, and also try to provide appropriate support. Don't though pretend to be having a similar experience. That's simply not authentic, will certainly not help them or you right now, and won't help the long-term relationship either (understatement!)



**Recommendation:** Don't be afraid to be authentic; it's actually a strength.

## Implement known change management strategies

There's plenty on the Internet that you can review for ideas on change management. Here are a few of the ideas I'd have right at the top of my agenda if I were leading a sales team right now...

- Provide a (realistic) Vision for the future. We don't know how temporary the current situation is. It is though temporary. So encourage your team to think about what's going to happen in the longer-term – maybe you could encourage them to identify which prospects and established accounts are going to fare best in the current environment and which are likely to flourish fastest post lockdown? How does this impact on targeting, focus, and time management? Are they as close to any new priority prospects / accounts as they need to be? If not, what do they need to understand / do in order to become closer to them? (I'll be uploading a **Sales Tip** about this to our YouTube channel first week in May).
- Communicate with the team a lot more than you think you need to. I've never yet met a business leader who's said: "*In hindsight, when we implemented change we now know that we were communicating too much*". I've met plenty though who've said: "*In hindsight, when we were implementing change and we thought we were communicating too much, in fact even then we weren't communicating enough*". Focus on communicating reassurance, Vision, problem solving, authenticity.
- Be available. Some will want more personal air time than others. That's fine; let them have that time. The No.1 issue right now is motivation and engagement, and the more you can engage the team, the better. Don't we say in sales 'People buy on emotion and then justify through logic'? Just the same will be true of the team buying into you as their manager and leader.
- The text books recommend that when implementing change you have an 'island of normality' that people can hold on to. In other words, when all around them is changing, there is one thing they can rely on to be the same as usual. Ensure you have one in place. It could be a weekly update from you, or the Monday morning kick-off meeting, or it could be a particular session that's always a part of your sales meetings. I know of one Internal sales team who pre-lockdown finished on a Friday afternoon by meeting to share their successes of the week while at the same time enjoying a pre-weekend beer. They're doing exactly the same right now virtually.

### The "Sales Management..." book series

The first 4 books in the 9 book "Sales Management... series are available now via both **Amazon** and **Kindle**...

"Sales Management: What it's *really* all about"

"Sales Management: So now you're a Sales Manager"

"Sales Management: Developing the skills of the sales team"

"Sales Management: Field Based Coaching"



- Different people move through the 'classic' stages of adapting to change at different rates. That's just the way that we are. So if you find someone in the team has moved into positive problem solving faster or slower than other members of the team, then it's important that you adapt to it rather than force them to adapt to the speed of you or others. For more information on how people react to change search on Google for "Kubler-Ross change curve".

**Recommendation:** Read around to learn about change management. Proactively implement the change management strategies that are relevant to your team.

## Engineer the right environment

By this I mean that it's important to provide the team with an understanding of the expectations you have as a manager, and that these expectations are authentic, reasonable, and engaging.

Is it reasonable to expect everyone in the team to be 100% energised 100% of the time? Well, no it isn't! So don't communicate this as an expectation. When an engaged salesperson has an 'off day', they tend to automatically ensure they make up for it on an 'on day'! So why not give them the flexibility to do this?

Some markets have declined as a consequence of the current situation, and some have declined significantly. Sales cycles are increasing in length due to budget pressures and increased perception of risk in purchasing. For many sales teams therefore, retaining the same sales objectives now as pre-lockdown is not realistic. In fact if expectations are not realistic, then they aren't objectives anyway, since the 'R-Realistic' criteria of the SMART objectives acronym is no longer satisfied. Some say cynically that when this happens you don't have an objective, you have a 'wish'!

Engineering the right environment includes recognising reality and not being blind to reality, or pretending that we're still in the same selling environment as we were in 2019.

Engineering the right environment doesn't though mean giving up. Top performing teams operate in a 'High challenge, High support' style environment. So why not challenge the team to set themselves a personal target for what extra sales they can acquire to make up for any shortfalls, and provide them positive coaching support so that they are able to develop a robust **Plan of Action** to achieve their ambitious goals?

This can then link into the weekly team sharing of objectives and achievements...

**Recommendation:** Be realistic about what's achievable. Help the team to set challenging and stretching personal goals, and help them develop a robust **Plan of Action** which will achieve them.

## Keep focused on personal growth & development

An immediate reaction to this suggestion of “*What?! How on earth can this be a priority right now?!*” is totally understandable.

But right now this *should* be a priority for a number of reasons...

The biggest is what we learned from the last two recessions about what drives the more successful sales organisations. The organisations that continued to invest *prudently* in training and development during the recessions achieved about the same as those which didn't during the actual recession period. Once the recession was over though, they pulled ahead of those which didn't quite significantly. So reason #1 to do this is because history tells us that it's a successful longer-term sales strategy.

Number two reason is that relevant personal development impacts positively on levels of engagement, which we've already said should be a key focus right now.

And linked to this is reason number three, which is that it also contributes to the setting of a Vision – so where each individual salesperson and the team as a whole aims to be once lockdown is over. And this will also have a further positive impact on motivation too.

Training and development is a lot more than courses, though there are some quality virtual workshops and courses that can be acquired both 'off the shelf' and developed specifically to meet the needs of the team. Reviewing (free) quality material on YouTube, other online resources, books, and even relevant TV programmes can all contribute positively. (It would be wrong of me to not plug our YouTube channel here! see <https://www.youtube.com/user/highcleresales>)

Or why not ask one of the team to prepare a competitor quiz for them to chair as part of the weekly sales meeting? Maybe each person could take a turn to focus on a different competitor? Or provide a researched overview of the needs of a particular market sector? Or maybe take turns to review materials from training courses already attended and provide their colleagues with a summary of the key messages and lessons learned?

The point is, you're not limited to having to buy a workshop or anything similar, and there are significant benefits to continuing these activities.

**Recommendation:** Have a development plan for the team to implement during lockdown; prepare them to pull ahead of the competition as and when markets soften.

## Summary

The current environment we're working in is challenging and a bit scary; we're all navigating uncharted waters. We've all heard (and probably used!) the well-known saying: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”. If ever this was true, it's right now.

We don't know how temporary the current situation is; what we do know though is that it *is* temporary. But isn't this just like any other unexpected challenge that arises, like a downturn in the economy, or an unexpected change in legislation, or anything else? The ideal of course is to predict these disrupters in advance. Sometimes though that's simply not possible. And on these occasions the responsibility of Sales Management is to adopt not only good management behaviours, but good leadership behaviours too.

The key responsibility for Sales Managers right now is retaining levels of motivation and engagement. This can be achieved by utilising leadership behaviours such as...

- Ensuring each individual and the team as a whole has high levels of role clarity.
- Ensuring the team's working week has clear structure, and in particular there is clarity about when they are in 'work mode' and 'personal life' mode.
- Being authentic when communicating with the team.
- Implementing recognised and relevant change management strategies.
- Continuing to focus on the development of relevant skills and knowledge in the team.

Help the team to succeed now, and help set them up to keep succeeding post lockdown too. There could even be an opportunity here to pull ahead of the competition...

Is there anything in particular you'd like to see in the next edition of *21<sup>st</sup> Century Sales Management*? If so, do feel comfy to drop us a line...