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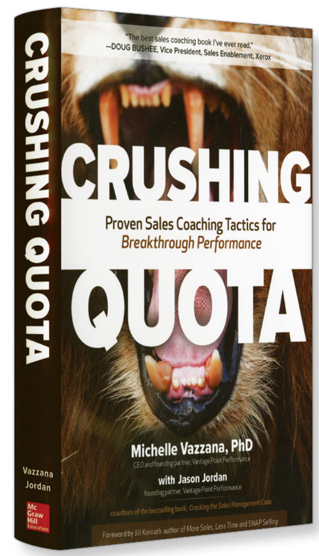
Crushing Quota

Proven Sales Coaching Tactics for Breakthrough Performance



by Michelle Vazzana, Ph.D.
with Jason Jordan

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Sales coaching works. Those who do it right prove this, time and time again. If you're one of the many managers yet to reap the benefits of sales coaching, the solution is in your hands.

Based on the most extensive research ever conducted into sales coaching practices, *Crushing Quota* breaks the process down into manageable components, so you can make sales coaching a realistic, meaningful part of your staff's job. It all comes down to three critical points that the vast majority of sales managers today are missing: provide clear direction for sellers on how to get to quota; ensure effective execution by coaching the right things, in the right measure, executed the right way; and assess seller performance and make timely course corrections.

It's all about helping your people make the best use of their time and effort. That's what coaches do. When a salesperson is skilled at deciding which priorities to pursue and which ones to ignore, results follow. It's that simple.

Based on powerful research-based best practices, *Crushing Quota* is the definitive guide to making sales coaching work for any sales team in any industry.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why coaching must focus on activities rather than outcomes.
- The four groups of activities in which salespeople engage and how to coach for each group.
- Why good sales-coaching conversations are similar to good sales conversations.
- To incorporate coaching into your day-to-day job — without working harder.

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: **CRUSHING QUOTA**

by Michelle Vazzana, Ph.D. with Jason Jordan

The authors: Michelle Vazzana is the CEO and a founding partner at Vantage Point Performance, the leading global sales management training and development firm. She has more than 32 years of successful sales and management experience and has conducted the most extensive research to date on sales coaching practices. Jason Jordan is a founding partner of Vantage Point Performance.

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PART I: COACHING — WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT ISN'T AND WHAT IT COULD BE

Welcome to the Jungle: The Scary Reality of Sales Management

Sales management is a tough gig. Fewer and fewer sales managers are making a successful transition from high-performing salesperson to high-performing sales manager. One of the primary reasons managers fail to get more salespeople to quota is that their work environment is inhospitable to the behaviors needed to drive better sales performance.

Coaching is critical. Coaching matters. And yet, so little good coaching is happening. A Vantage Point Sales Management Practice study, based on revenue performance, showed that high-achieving individuals who were successful salespeople are largely unable to replicate their high performance when managing a sales team: 75 percent of the sales managers missed their revenue targets and were getting fewer than half their sellers to quota.

Managers want to succeed. They want to coach, yet they can't figure out how. Why not?

The Chaos of Sales Management

Even very sophisticated organizations unwittingly create the very problems that prohibit effective coaching. Sales managers operate in a pressure cooker. Pressure is exerted from every direction, and it doesn't let up.

The primary and most unrelenting pressure comes from sales leaders. Their insatiable appetite for data is strong, almost primal. The forecast is to a sales leader as lobster is to a foodie. It is a tasty treat. And limitless consumption is not merely acceptable but desirable.

Human resources departments are commonly responsible for ensuring that the right salespeople get hired and trained. Often this is done by developing very sophisticated competency models for each role within the sales force. Much of the burden of assessing and developing salespeople rests on the shoulders of the sales manager.

Marketing is another function that places demands on the sales manager. New products are being launched. New campaigns run. To make sure the desired growth targets are met, marketers need information. They don't trust the information in the customer relationship management (CRM) system so they want it scrubbed. And they want it scrubbed by the sales managers.

Sales operations has another set of demands. Sales managers are constantly judged on CRM and tool usage, and they are regularly reminded where they stand.

Customers have billing issues, service issues and other problems that need resolution. Salespeople want help dealing with customer issues. The list goes on and on.

A time study conducted by Dr. Adam Rapp, the executive director and professor of sales at Ohio State University, revealed that at best, managers spend about 32 percent of their time managing their sales team. The other 68 percent of the managers' time is consumed by managing information, administration and direct customer interaction.

How can sales managers go from almost no coaching to coaching consistently and doing so very effectively? If managers can get the right guidance, the transition from salesperson to sales manager can be smoother, take less time and be less traumatic.

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Sales Coaching: How It's Wrong and Why It Fails

Here's what coaching looks like for most sales managers. You attend a sales call with one of your sellers, you take detailed notes on what occurs, and you conduct a debrief in the car on the way back to the office. Coaching done. This has been and continues to be the conventional wisdom on how best to coach a salesperson.

Unfortunately, this outdated view of coaching is no longer viable for two compelling reasons. First, there is a practical reality that prevents most sales managers from spending more and more time in the field. The ratio of salespeople to sales managers is growing. Another is that teams tend to be more geographically dispersed.

The biggest and most surprising reason that yesteryear's get-in-the-field-as-much-as-possible coaching strategy is a bust is that new research proves that it simply doesn't work! Low performers report that they coach 27 percent more hours per month than the high-performing managers. This finding goes directly against conventional wisdom that more coaching is better.

How Sales Managers Coach (or Don't Coach)

What managers often think of as coaching is not really coaching at all, especially from the salesperson's perspective.

Sales coaching is equipping salespeople to execute activities consistently well. The best sales coaching involves collaborative dialogue between manager and seller about the activities necessary to get that salesperson to quota. Valuable sales coaching is relevant, timely and helpful to the seller.

Inspection, on the other hand, is about gathering information. Part of the reason managers inspect is to ensure that salespeople do things, but inspection alone doesn't allow managers to determine whether the things salespeople do are done well. Inspection is a necessary activity for sales managers and often forms the basis for coaching; however, it is not the same thing as coaching.

The curse of knowledge also happens, because once we know something (like how to sell against a thorny competitor), we don't remember what it was like not to know it. We assume that others (namely, our salespeople) have a similar frame of reference. This curse of knowledge causes us to be unintentionally unclear and ambiguous when providing direction to our salespeople. We often leave out crucial details that could have been helpful. We tell only part of the story, when we should have told the whole story.

There is also the culture of dependence — your worst enemy. Dependence is not inherently bad. It is the level of dependence that often goes awry. Unhealthy dependence on the sales manager often occurs because of a lack of clarity between the role of the manager and the role of the seller. Many sales managers are not clear in their own mind about what constitutes their job versus the job of their salespeople.

The Best Path Forward

The first order of business is to establish a common language. We need to be very clear what we mean by sales coaching as compared to other types of coaching we do as sales managers. A common language helps managers and salespeople get on the same page. It reduces the prevalent disconnects between manager and seller perception. It forms the foundation for effective coaching.

It is time to remove the guesswork and apply some science to sales coaching.

PART II: THE GROUNDWORK FOR GREATNESS

Deciding What to Coach

We coach to help our sellers reach their quotas, but we can't coach those outcomes *directly*. We can coach only to things that *lead* to quota and revenue attainment. The Vantage Point Sales Management Study showed that coaching to *activities* was the only type of coaching significantly related to quota attainment. A full 20 percent of the variance in quota attainment was attributed to activity coaching.

There are four distinct groups of activities in which salespeople engage. These groups of activities work together to drive specific types of sales outcomes.

Territory management. There are many customers and prospects, and they are not equally attractive. Prioritization is required to maximize sales efforts.

Account management. Select customers are vital to organization performance. Special, in-depth attention must be given to acquire, retain or grow these important accounts.

Opportunity management. Individual deals are large and complex, and they involve multiple decision-makers. Competition is typically strong. Winning requires thoughtful strategy.

Call management. The outcome of a given sales interaction is important. Each interaction is unique and therefore requires advanced preparation.

To determine which type of coaching you should provide, it is useful to revisit the nature of the roles of the salespeople you manage and determine which sales processes are aligned with those roles. It is likely that more than one sales process is relevant to the salespeople on your team and that they would benefit from some combination of coaching.

To choose individual activities, three levels of metrics are necessary to create the best path to results for each of your salespeople and increase the likelihood of making quota. The key is to begin with the outcome and work your way backward.

Start with the *business results* you want sellers to achieve. Link the results to specific *sales objectives* that provide direction and guidance for salesperson effort. Then, identify and coach the *sales activities* most closely aligned with achievement of sales objectives.

Structuring Coaching Conversations

It is time to learn *how* to coach effectively. The most successful sales managers don't coach more. They coach differently. Good coaching requires managers to make better choices during those precious hours they spend coaching their salespeople. It requires managers to fight the tendency of what feels natural or easy and to choose what may feel too structured or restrictive at first.

There are very specific steps sales managers can take that dramatically improve the quality of their coaching. One of the most important, and often overlooked, elements of effective coaching is the use of an agenda. Agendas lead to better coaching conversations. Less is better. It is useful to have fewer agenda items and cover those items in more depth.

Conducting Effective Coaching Conversations

Good coaching happens in *conversations* between the sales manager and the salesperson. Good coaching conversations are remarkably similar to good sales calls.

For example, good sales calls are highly collaborative. They have a good balance of back-and-forth between the customer and the salesperson. They typically include both seeking and giving on the part of the salesperson. Questions are asked to better understand the customer's environment, and information is typically provided by the seller to address some aspect of customer needs. Good sales calls occur when the seller is prepared, has an agenda and accomplishes some actionable next step as a result of the sales call.

Good coaching conversations follow a similar pattern. For this reason, the following is a conversation model as opposed to a coaching model.

Opening. The opening allows the coach to set the stage for an effective coaching conversation. It includes an agenda, agreement on time frame and desired outcome. The opening lays the groundwork for a productive, collaborative dialogue.

Seeking information. Seeking information is the primary behavior that creates collaboration. Effective coaching questions require thought and planning. Which questions the coach asks the seller are dependent on the topic being discussed. Although seeking information and giving information occur in a collaborative, iterative way, seeking must come first.

Giving information. Good coaching questions help the sales manager determine which information needs to be shared. Good coaches, like good salespeople, ensure that the information they provide is relevant and valuable to the conversation.

Closing. Finally, effective coaching discussions end with actionable next steps. Decisions are made throughout the course of the coaching conversation, and commitments are made. A review of these decisions and agreed-upon actions is the best way to close the conversation. It is much more effective if the salesperson is the one summarizing the discussion and reviewing the agreed-upon next steps.

Formalizing Sales Coaching into Your Day-to-Day Job

For a coaching plan to be viable, it must be realistic and fit into the job you have. Sales managers need a strategy for getting better without having to work harder. They can't expend enough effort to overcome the devastating impacts of poor decisions about what, how and when to coach.

It is useful to think of sales coaching on a continuum of formality. On the low end of the continuum, we have ad hoc and unplanned interactions. On the high end of formality, we have scheduled and repeated interactions. All coaching interactions fall somewhere on the continuum.

Ad hoc interactions are unplanned, spontaneous conversations. Ad hoc interactions are very prevalent between sales managers and salespeople because they don't require much planning or forethought.

When we are interrupted, our primary goal is to quickly get back to what we were doing before the interruption. We don't collaborate in these situations. We don't probe deeply in these situations. In other words, we don't coach in these situations. Ad hoc conversations feel efficient, but they are just not effective.

As-needed coaching interactions are typically scheduled, one-time events related to a near-term sales activity. A deal may have changed course and need near-term attention. A salesperson may have secured a meeting with an important contact in an existing opportunity and could benefit from a planning discussion. These scenarios are time bound, somewhat urgent and need coaching attention. While it is tempting to conduct coaching discussions as events arise, it is almost always better to plan a time for the discussion — even if the scheduled time is within the same day.

Some coaching topics lend themselves to regularly **scheduled interactions**. Discussions of the pipeline, strategizing complex deals and strategizing an approach to key accounts are all topics that benefit from regularly scheduled, recurring coaching interactions.

Formality is important, but it can be tricky. Too much formality and you paralyze your ability to coach and your salespeople's ability to sell. Too little and you leave salespeople unattended and confused, and you leave too many things to chance.

Moderation matters. Selecting the most important types of coaching conversations and formalizing *those* conversations is the key to operationalizing coaching into a manager's day-to-day job.

Research shows that regardless of the type of coaching, high-performing managers coached less frequently but for longer durations than their lower-performing peers. They were more focused and deliberate in their coaching interactions.

PART III: COACHING TO ACTIVITIES — THE ITTY BITTY NITTY GRITTY

Territory and Account Coaching

Let's dive into the specifics of the two sets of sales activities that are necessary for finding, expanding and retaining business: territory management and account management. Territory management is designed to help salespeople properly apply effort across many accounts, whereas account management is about applying effort most effectively within an account.

Territory Coaching

The goal of territory coaching is to ensure that your salespeople target the right customers and prospects and attend to them with an appropriate level of effort.

The **strategic elements** of territory coaching are the three decision-making elements that set your salespeople up for success. The first of these elements, establishment of a **prioritization scheme**, is the primary decision that drives the rest of the territory management process.

Prioritization schemes do not have to be complicated, but they must be specific. They can be as simple as an A/B/C/D designation, where A accounts have the highest potential and D accounts the lowest. Some organizations use a high-mid-low prioritization.

The second element, **prioritizing customers**, is a relatively straightforward task if the scheme is specific, well understood and quantifiable. **Call patterns**, the third element, are identified to ensure that actual sales effort is aligned to desired sales effort. This last part of territory planning is critical because sales managers must have some target to measure against.

High-performing managers ensure that their salespeople keep abreast of changes in their territories and adjust the prioritization of accounts accordingly.

The more **tactical aspect** of territory management and coaching is ensuring that calls are executed according to plan. The two elements of this include **executing calls** according to the pattern and **measuring and course correcting**. By formally measuring the calls salespeople make, managers can help sellers make needed adjustments and course correct.

In most cases, territory coaching involves helping salespeople improve prospecting efforts on new accounts as well as expand opportunities within existing accounts. The following territory coaching questions can form a base to pull from when planning your own coaching questions.

Prospective accounts questions include

- In which segment of accounts have you had the most success generating interest?
- What messages are resonating? Which ones are not?
- For which accounts have you been unable to establish contact? What have you tried?
- Which competitors have a stronghold in your territory?
- Which competitors are you best able to unseat? Why?
- What have you done to differentiate our solutions in the minds of your prospective buyers?

Existing account questions include

- Where have you had the most success upselling and/or cross-selling?
- When you've had success improving product mix and/or improving share of wallet, which strategies have you used?
- What have you done to reduce your service burden and create more selling time for your existing accounts?
- When you've lost share, which competitors have taken it? Why?
- Which accounts are at risk? Why?
- What plans do you have in place to mitigate these risks? How can I help?

Account Coaching

Account coaching is the key to ensuring that your salespeople fully leverage their selling effort within a single large account.

The **strategic elements** of account management and associated coaching typically include some sort of **account assessment** or analysis (first element). Accounts have goals and objectives that change from year to year. Any business needs that your salespeople's solutions address must somehow **align** to the achievement of account goals and objectives as well as associated initiatives (second element).

Most companies that have large, important accounts also have some sort of documented **account planning process** (third element). Within that process, salespeople are expected to complete the plans with the help of their sales manager. This type of strategic account coaching ensures that the approach to a given account includes alignment between your goals and the goals of the account.

The tactical aspect of account coaching involves **execution of an action plan**. The action plan reflects a pursuit strategy for sales effort. Action plans include specific types of activities that must be accomplished, time frames for the execution of those activities and resources needed to support those activities. The action plan forms the basis for ongoing tactical account coaching. As plans are executed and opportunities pursued, progress must be **measured and course corrections** must be made.

To ensure that account coaching is highly collaborative, it is necessary to plan and use good account coaching questions.

Some strategic account coaching questions include

- Which business units are the best targets for growth within the account?
- What are the account or business unit objectives? How have they changed year over year?
- Are there key initiatives in place that we can link into with our solutions?
- Who are the strongest competitors within the account and/or business unit?
- What is our value proposition and our most significant competitive differentiators?

Some tactical account questions include

- What is the contact strategy and time frame?
- Which of our resources can we bring to bear to add value for this contact?
- What proof sources can we bring to bear to generate interest with this contact or function? Do we have case studies that we can leverage?

Opportunity Coaching

The goal of opportunity coaching is to help salespeople qualify, pursue and win deals. The larger and more complex the products or service being sold, the more critical it is for managers to get this right. The Vantage Point Sales Management Practice study showed that the more complex the buying decision, the less likely salespeople were to make quota. Salespeople who sell solutions that are harder for buyers to buy are 17 percent less likely to make quota.

Because the complexity of the buying decision has such a significant impact on quota attainment, the following guidance is oriented to the stages of the buying process.

Identify needs. In the identify needs stage of the buying process, buyers are figuring out whether they need to make a change. Selling in the identify needs stage is oriented toward effective opportunity qualification. Salespeople must gain the right type of information to establish the viability of the opportunity.

Coaching in the identify needs stage ensures that salespeople conduct effective client research, objectively assess opportunity viability and gain required information during individual interactions.

Establish criteria. In the establish criteria stage, buyers are evaluating what is important to them in making a change. Selling in the establish criteria stage is oriented toward understanding and shaping the criteria buyers will use to make their purchase decision.

Coaching at the establish criteria stage is oriented toward ensuring that salespeople truly understand and are prepared to shape the criteria the buyers will use to make their purchase decision. Gaining an understanding of the buying criteria must be accomplished through proper questioning, which you can help sellers develop through your coaching efforts. As a coach, you must require evidence that your salespeople uncover this information.

Assess solutions. This is the stage at which buyers are digging into the details of various solutions and comparing them to the criteria they've established. As buyers evaluate various solutions, their buying criteria often change. As buyers learn new information during this stage, that information often reshapes what they deem as important. Selling in the assess solutions stage involves the position of solutions in the most attractive light, linked to established buying criteria.

Coaching in the assess solutions stage is oriented toward helping salespeople position their solution in the most attractive light based on established buying criteria. Because a critical success factor at this stage involves the vetting of the buyers' perceptions, it is useful to play the devil's advocate during your coaching discussions. As a coach, you can help your salespeople look at the various solutions being considered from the buyers' perspective and the competitors' perspective.

Mitigate risks. In this late stage of the buying process, buyers have typically narrowed the playing field down to a single provider. Buyer thinking shifts dramatically. Buyers start analyzing what they stand to lose by making a change. Selling in the mitigate risks stage involves the surfacing of buyer concerns, negotiation of terms and development of implementation plans.

Coaching during the mitigate risks stage is oriented toward helping salespeople build buyer confidence. Buyers often become insecure during this stage, and salespeople must tread carefully. Effective coaching in this stage helps salespeople provide adequate proof sources, negotiate terms and reinforce solution fit.

Use the following questions as a guide to help ensure that the coaching conversations are highly collaborative and relevant.

Early-stage opportunity coaching questions include

- What is your understanding of the company, opportunity and our solution fit?
- Is the opportunity qualified? Why?
- What are the prospects or customers trying to do? What are their needs and business issues?
- Who are the key decision-makers? How will they buy from you? Where are they in the buying process?
- Why will they buy from us? What is our value proposition, and what is their perception of us (including history)?
- Who is competing for the business? How will we win and why?
- What do you know and not know, and how can you close gaps in your knowledge?
- What are your next steps?

Call Coaching

Sales calls are the lifeblood, the beating heart, of sales execution. Call coaching is the mechanism that keeps the heartbeat of sales strong and steady. Just like the heart, sales calls need monitoring and attention. Ignore them at your own peril.

The most successful sales managers in the Vantage Point Sales Management Practice study, the ones that have 75 percent or more of their salespeople at quota, are more likely than their lower-performing peers to formally request time to help their salespeople plan upcoming calls.

When high-performing managers coach their salespeople to better execute individual sales calls, they adjust their call coaching efforts in much the same way that they adjust their opportunity coaching efforts: They align their efforts according to the stage of the customers' buying process.

Buyers' interests change as an opportunity progresses, and so must the salesperson's approach to individual interactions within that opportunity.

Identify needs. Coaching for sales calls that are in the identify needs stage of the buying process is oriented toward helping salespeople understand and shape buyer needs, tease out the details of the decision-making process and qualify the opportunity. Call coaching must help salespeople uncover details about buyer problems and desires and help salespeople ask good, probing questions to get buyers to articulate what is happening in their current environment. It is also vital to ensure that your salespeople understand the needs and issues of *each* buyer.

Good call coaching helps equip salespeople to question their buyers about the cost of inaction — what happens if the buyer does nothing. It is also important to ensure that your salespeople truly understand the process the buyer will use to make the decision. Good call coaching can ensure that your salespeople understand the different players involved, their relative influence on the buying decision, the timeline required and how these types of decisions have been made in the past.

Establish criteria. Coaching for sales calls in the establish criteria stage of the buying process prepares sellers to understand and shape buying criteria, determine the competitive landscape and set themselves up for effective competitive differentiation.

The first order of business is coaching your salespeople to quantify needs into tangible buying criteria. Salespeople need a strategy to accomplish this task. This is a rich coaching opportunity because buying criteria become the measuring stick for how buyers will evaluate solutions.

Which needs should the salesperson focus on for this purpose? Well, the ones that are relevant to the buyers and provide the best opportunity for competitive differentiation. This means that your salespeople have to know which needs are important to the buyers and which alternatives the buyers are considering.

Assess solutions. Once buyers have a clear idea of what they want, and hopefully a set of defined buying criteria, they go about the task of evaluating potential providers. In this assess solutions stage, the solutions are scoped, proposals are provided, demonstrations are conducted and every salesperson tries to position their solution as the best one. Coaching to this stage is vital to increase the chances of becoming a finalist and ultimately winning a deal.

An important goal of call coaching in this stage is to ensure that salespeople understand the competitive landscape. Sellers who are most effective find out with whom they are competing, the solutions their competitors are providing and the buyers' perception of each solution. Call coaching at this stage is designed to help salespeople present their offering in a way that is highly relevant, compelling and differentiated from other solutions being considered.

In addition to helping salespeople develop their presentations, it is quite valuable to have them do a trial run. It is remarkable what we can learn, as coaches, when we see how the plan unfolds in a live conversation.

Mitigate risks. Call coaching in this late stage of the buying process is designed to help salespeople build buyer confidence. Salespeople are often having conversations about specific concerns regarding pricing, terms and implementation. Negotiating with the buyers is a particularly challenging type of sales call at this stage.

Coaching matters. It is vital that managers and sellers agree on a negotiation strategy and play out how that strategy is likely to unfold. Coaching at this stage can prepare salespeople to empathize with their buyers and acknowledge that other clients had similar concerns. Managers can help their salespeople identify and communicate references, case studies and other proof sources to mitigate buyer concerns.

As usual, the most effective call coaching conversations involve a balance of give-and-take between the sales manager and the salesperson. Below is a typical list of early-stage call coaching questions:

- Where are the buyers in the buying process?
- What is their primary objective at this stage?
- What is the call objective?
- What are the prospects' needs? Buying criteria?
- How do our offerings address their needs?
- What questions will you ask?
- What are potential reactions or objections?
- What materials or resources will you need?
- What is your agenda for the call?
- What will we ask for as next steps?

Sales coaching doesn't have to be a mystery. If you implement the practices outlined above, you will get more of your salespeople to quota — you can truly crush your quota.

MORE SV CONTENT ON SALES

Summary: *More Sales, Less Time* by Jill Konrath. Jill Konrath, a globally recognized sales consultant and speaker, delivers a unique productivity guide specifically for sales success. Konrath helps you to develop strategies specifically tailored to your life in sales, using your strengths to cut through the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Webinar: *How to Build Trust in Sales* by Paul Smith. Paul Smith identifies the ingredients of the most effective sales stories and offers model stories, skill-building exercises and enlightening examples from Microsoft, Costco, Xerox, Abercrombie & Fitch and Hewlett Packard.