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The Crisis In Sales Management Is An Old Problem

When I first became a sales consultant, and began working with clients, I was surprised at the lack of basic sales skills and business knowledge of most of the sales groups I encountered.

Whether we consulted with multi-billion dollar corporations or middle market companies, the story was always the same - the salespeople lacked basic selling skills and knowledge, and the overall skill level and knowledge of sales managers was worse.

As I thought about why this appeared to be the case, I encountered a woman who recruited senior sales managers during the last twenty-five years. I told her what I had observed, and asked her two questions: First, were my observations valid? And second, if they were valid, how did this happen?

Without hesitation she told me that during most of the 1990's business was generally good and getting better each month. Salespeople in a great many industries had only to make sure they answered the telephone to take orders from customers who were anxious to buy. Selling skills and business knowledge weren't needed to meet and exceed sales quotas. Sales managers, again in many industries, had little managing to do as their teams met their numbers.

That all changed, of course, as the economy began to slow in 2000. All of a sudden things changed for salespeople and for sales managers. The phone stopped ringing off the hook, and salespeople and managers found themselves competing in a cruel world against increasingly more desperate competitors.

According to the sales recruiter, many experienced salespeople lost their selling skills, and those new to selling never acquired even basic sales skills. The same things happened to experienced sales managers and those new to management during this good economy.

Now, of course, in the midst of the worst recession anyone can recall, senior sales leaders and senior managers are facing the reality of a crisis in sales management.

When times get tough, and companies begin to lose customers and market share, senior managers want quick fixes. They often ask, "How can we gain more of our customer's mindshare, now? How can we differentiate ourselves from our competitors? How can we sell value and avoid caving into customer demands for more service and lower prices? How can we upgrade our selling skills? How can we motivate our sales teams?"

As they turn to sales managers for answers, many senior executives discover that the sales managers cannot deliver comprehensive solutions, let alone quick fixes. The executives come face to face with the crisis in sales management. It is an old problem that won't go away without a new focus on front-line sales leadership.

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