Sarah Zohn
C-Level Mentor and Author for B2B technology companies
April, 2020

VP Head of Sales, Actions to Maximize Potential in Turbulent Times

Over the years as C-Level Mentor I have helped many executives in B2B technology companies. One characteristic that makes Heads of Sales - VP or CRO - stand out is that their organizations are highly influenced by their style of management. Your personality reflects in your organization like a mirror and you'd better realize it for better and for worse. There are three major styles that I have seen: If your focus is on relationships with prospects and customers, your organization will emphasize it. If you are a closer and a numbers person, your organization will be like that too, and perhaps lose on long term goals as a result. If you focus on funnel conversions, your organization will spend much time on playing with the numbers of forward looking statistics, perhaps too much.

On the road to recovery from crisis your emphasis should be on the people - the account managers and their support environment. The people and not the process will make the difference. So how do you go about improving the performance of your workforce while they're actively seeking opportunities and working on progressing the sales campaigns? The answer lies in how you organize their support. Join me in looking at the challenge from macro and micro perspectives.

- Support structure. If your sales force numbers a couple dozen or more sales account managers, you can divide them according to the 20-50-30 rule.

  ○ The top 20 % of the organization are people who know how to sell into your customer targets. The organization needs to respond to their needs, and let them run as independently as they prefer. As the head of the organization, you should listen to them and remove obstacles; fix the process if deal approvals and information flow aren't working with quick response. You could set up a pool of people from your organization as their virtual support team so that all their needs are answered with minimal delays. Imposing extra processes on these top 20% people is a waste of their time and self-motivation. Better have someone assist them if adhering to those processes is critical to you.

  ○ The 50% majority are the average who are generally acceptable sales people. Training, group discussions, product reviews, and anything else that raises the level of proficiency should target them and their needs. Other support, mainly technical knowledge, should be as accessible as possible. I recommend that every salesperson in this tier have an assigned mentor, buddy or coach to help them with reviews and brainstorming of ideas.

The direct manager could serve this purpose. However, in many cases the direct manager is the chief closer, and therefore, doesn't have the capacity to mentor the reps. For this group that needs more coaching, the process is important, as it serves also as training to improve proficiency.

- ○ Bottom 30% of your workforce are the sales reps that are under a magnifying glass, including those who are newly hired. Your organization needs to provide them extra support, such as a senior-buddy system, to help them move up to the middle tier. With frequent reviews and higher levels of supervision you can call out the people who will not make it to the middle tier. Turnover in sales is always higher than it is in other functions of the company. It's a tough job, and those who can't make it in your environment shouldn't stay.

- For a small team, if your sales group has up to 20 account managers, statistics don't apply; however, the principles of the 20-50-30 rule are still valid. You need to review your sales people periodically and decide for each one of them which category they belong to: extra supervision with a magnifying glass, or ongoing training and enrichment activities, or independence.

  Also in small companies many people from all corners of the company are often involved in supporting sales. Typically systems engineers, support engineers, CTO and even the CEO might be involved in sales. The most effective and efficient way to organize such a mode of operation is to form teams with diverse skills in them - each team is dedicated to support one sales rep. This sales support team approach ensures that the salesperson is not left alone on the front line and there's no wasted time in the search for information. The team approach benefits both the sales and the supporting people, as they too get their needed information instantly, and therefore, their ability to support is improved. I've recently helped one of my client companies in transitioning to this mode of operation, and within one month, all involved voted to stay working in teams rather than falling back on prior work methods.

- Sales Account Managers proficiency. For a startup just entering the market, the proficiency of sales reps can't be measured only by level of quota achievement. Even with a quarter by quarter ramping up approach the level of goal achievement isn't a real metric or predictor of proficiency, since so much, at this startup stage of the company, depends on other factors. On the other hand, you should assess proficiency right from the start, and you should do it by: hard skills, soft skills, teamwork and motivation. Hard skills that are relevant to sales reps are, first and foremost ,the ability to present and defend the value proposition of the product, and the ability to forge relationships. Soft skills are the ones that would be nice to have, but they can also be complemented by a support team.

  In large or small sales groups, you should do a performance assessment every quarter, even if it's as simple as deciding to which 20-50-30 tier each person belongs, so that the right support is applied.

- Process. Good sales people typically view the burden of abiding by a process as a distraction and a time sink. The focus and the time should be spent mostly on winning deals and key accounts. Therefore, the process should be limited to the minimum necessary. If you were comfortable with a certain process in a previous company, it doesn't mean that it's necessary in your current job as well. The processes should serve, first and foremost, the sales people, and then the management layers above them. For example, I have not seen the real value in rating probability of deals in a finer resolution than: high probability, medium probability, low probability. The end result is usually widely different than what was projected, and saying that one deal has 50% probability and another 40%, doesn't really affect the actions that the sales team needs to take or the end result.

- Buying patterns of customers. Often the biggest obstacle to closing a deal is that your proposal is different from the buying pattern of the prospective customer. Large customers buy differently than small customers - they have different internal processes and buying criteria. Some customers will buy only complete solutions and others will prefer the best-of-breed approach. Educate your salespeople to study the profile of the customers also from the perspective of buying patterns, and with this improved understanding of customers you will limit the futile campaigns that waste resources and time and yield very little.

- Knowledge management. The most important supply line to the sales people is access to information. Content repositories should be designed carefully to satisfy the needs of the users for quick access to content. In small companies, where content is updated frequently, there is no replacement for human support teams. As the company grows, however, the repositories become more critical for allowing experienced salespeople to progress their campaigns quickly. Ask your people how much time they spend on finding information and revising it for their needs. You will learn from them whether you've built a good supply line for them. Fixing insufficiencies in this critical supply line should be a high priority for you as head of the sales group.

- Hiring. I'm almost sure that you, like most VP of Sales, or like most other executives for that matter, think that you are a good judge of character and that you have the ability to select good people. If that was true, the workplaces would have been filled only with excellent people. But we know this isn't the case. By definition, most people that can be hired for a specific position conform to the average of the pool of qualified candidates. We can't be lucky every time and hire only the best, or as some executives like to say: I hire only the top 10%.

  The most important message for you is that you shouldn't fall in the trap of selecting people based on pizazz. Test the hard skills that are needed for the job, like: knowledge of the industry, depth of understanding of technology products and how to sell them, understanding of customer environments, and above all, have the candidate show you that they can present and defend a value proposition.

As VP of Sales you're the father, leader, and judge of your salespeople. You have to see your key activity as nurturing them and keeping their supply and support lines tuned to their needs. Your role certainly has the part of managing relationships with key accounts, and perhaps being the lead closer of the organization, and this part of your role might give you fame. And yet, your true value to your company is in operating your entire organization at peak performance levels.

Sought after C-Level Mentor, consultant and speaker, Sarah Zohn is a highly respected expert on Operational Strategies for Growth and Go-To Market for hi-tech companies. She brings broad experience from her positions as VP in mega multinational corporations as well as from coaching dozens of B2B technology companies and guiding them with game-changing strategies. With hundreds of consulting interactions with startups, Sarah also knows well the nature of startups and their ecosystem.
Sarah is a graduate of B.Sc.E.E and MBA from the Technion Institute of Technology in Israel. Her executive level positions at EMC Corporation over 15 years covered hardware and software Engineering, Services and Customer Success, Product Management and Sales. She also served as Deputy Executive Vice President, where she participated at the top of the decision making processes of EMC's leadership. Sarah's experience spans over continents, cultures, several technology-based industries, and hundreds of mentored managers and leaders.