

Finding that great Sales Director can be a challenge



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Finding a great Sales Director is fairly straight forward, aren't all Sales people that same, just find one with a good track record! Really?

I have worked with companies, helping them build their management teams since the early 00's. One of the biggest challenges facing a company when hiring at a senior level is sourcing a great Sales Director. By their very nature, sales people are good at selling themselves. If they are not, then that is the first alarm bell. But someone who can sell themselves does not make them automatically, an ideal candidate for that senior position.

A common mistake is promoting or recruiting that great sales person to become the Sales Manager. Unfortunately, that's not how this works. Because someone is a great sales person, does not automatically mean that they will become a great Sales Manager. Of course, great sales people can make great Sales Directors, but not always, and it does require them to develop additional skills. Have they done that already, or will the business ensure that they develop those necessary skills? By not asking those questions, not only, have you just lost your top performer, and have to replace them, but if you don't provide the necessary support and management development, you'll not have a great Sales Manager, either! Great Sales Directors/Managers are different to great sales people. But, great Sales Directors, like great sales people are not born, and can be made. For many years it was all about having a big personality, 'the gift-of-the-gab' and some difficult-to-define 'X' factor! While this is a view that, thankfully, is not as prevalent today, you still come across it. I am certain that many would be shocked at the number of companies that still seem to hold that view, when searching for a Sales Director.

Sales is a learnable set of professional skills, just the same way that becoming an accountant is a business skill set that someone can learn. Unfortunately, the amount of sales skills building that some organisations do, is sadly still far from what they do when it comes to training other types of business skills sets. Someone with a deep knowledge of a product/sector or who has a domain expertise, does not automatically become a great sales person, nor is it the popularist head-shrinking that seemed very common, among sales team development in the late 80's/ early 90's. Understanding the process and building a strategy based on that understanding is an essential starting point.

But as I said before, being a great sales person doesn't mean that that same person will make a great Sales Manager. Sales management is about being good at managing the sales processes, other people, and being able to focus on the things that will make a difference to the development of the business sales targets. It's about focusing on the inputs rather than the end result. As a Senior Sales Director once said to me, *"get the inputs right and working, and the results will follow"*.

Sectoral biases and experience can be critical, but not at the expense of Sales management skills. Having a black notebook of contacts with an ability to open doors, for most business is important but not if it doesn't come with an ability to business-process the sale and with skills that is not depended on any one person. One of the things that I should clear up is what is the difference between a Business Development Director and a Sales Director? It is a phase that is often used interchangeably and yet the two are very different. Sales is about the ability to execute rather than opening opportunities in their broader sense.

But how does one know that the person being interviewed is a Sales Director with the skills that your business requires? Before one gets to the interview stage, the company needs to be clear what it is that they require, for their stage of development. *"I'll know it when I see it!"* is just not good enough. Does the business have a sales process, or does it require someone with the knowledge and skill to build one? How well does the business measure and control/understand its key sales metrics? From initial prospect list, to final meeting and signing of contracts, how long does the process take? What are acceptable conversion rates at each stage? Is it a B2B or B2C business? Selling in a Business to Business environment is very different to selling in a Business to Consumer environment, even if the product is being sold initially to a large corporate retailer.

For some businesses, it is about having someone to execute the opportunities that other senior members of team have been able to open up over the life of the business. For other businesses, it is about having a person who will find the opportunities and make them happen. Having a detailed position profile before you go looking for the person, measured and tailored to the business and its stage of development is critical. Having someone who understands the sale process and each stage of it is critical or at least with the skills to manage it. Sales management is not about knowing the product or being able to sell better than the person on the front line. It is being able to understand/ manage the process, while also being able to see where the skills gaps are in the team and being able to provide support and guidance to overcome them. As an interviewer, I am as interested in understanding how someone got to their target rather than the target actually achieved. How did they understand the team's strengths and weaknesses and how did they manage the people to overcome those obstacles, be they frontlines sales, or regional managers.

As a senior manager recruiter, I have a strong belief in transferable skills. A little old fashioned, for some companies these days, perhaps? Senior Sales people can move from one sector to another, however, as I said earlier, if it critical to understand what stage of development your business is at. Like most things in business it is the planning that requires most of time, effort and energy. But just as in other aspects of business, it can also be where you save most money.

Really great Sales Directors/Managers focus on the process and inputs rather than the outcomes. Having a Revenue target is one thing, and being able to work back from it and understand how many customers that that translate to and how many prospects that requires, etc is critical. But how to manage the human element is what a great Sales Director must demonstrate.

And no, not all sales people are the same.

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