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The Seven Deadly Sins Of PreSales Managers

Do People Really Join Companies And Leave Their Managers?

A while back, after a keynote speech for a midsize hi-tech company, I sat down with their entire team of first-line presales managersⁱ. We discussed the basic dos and don'ts of presales management, and came up with these "seven deadly sins"ⁱⁱ. They really apply to all levels of leadership, to prospective leaders and even to your interactions with friends and family.

I'll put the call to action right up front. Do this! List out the sins, and then rate your boss, his/her boss, and finally yourself. If you are truly an open-door manager, ask your staff to give you feedback on these sins – you may get an interesting surprise.

The Seven Deadly Sins

I am not a big fan of learning by negatives, so I have added some examples and/or "do this" style ideas for each sin.

1. **Expecting Perfection - You Are Only Human.** You are going to make mistakes, no matter how smart and how experienced you are. Expecting perfection from yourself, and by extension, your staff, is an exercise in futility. You should have the expectation that both you and your team will learn from mistakes, that you will not repeat mistakes, and that you should take accountability for your mistakes.



Admitting that you have made a mistake is not a sign of weakness, particularly if you ignored or over-ruled one of your staff in route to that mistake. You're not always going to be correct, and people will have different opinions than you. I once told my presales team, a rep and his manager that there was absolutely no way we were going to get a particular deal and we were wasting our time. Ten weeks later, they walked in with a seven-figure purchase order. I then publically apologized in front of an entire regional sales group of 120 people at our next quarterly meeting (and pointed out that I trusted my managerial team enough to let them compete in the deal).

2. **Micro-Managing the Detail.** Almost all of you reading this article have worked for a micro-manager at some point. Doesn't make you feel too good, does it? You need to realize that there is more than one way to accomplish almost any presales task – whether it is installing software, preparing for a demo, running a sales call etc. The question is really was the task accomplished satisfactorily? If in doubt about giving detailed instructions – ask!

This all brings up the ugly concept of delegation – probably the most effective #1 positive skill for a leader. Now whenever someone accomplishes a task in a different way than I would have, I take it as a learning opportunity – on the basis that I am not perfect (see sin #1). I had this beaten into me after six weeks as a first-time manager by two of my staff – not everyone is lucky, so early!

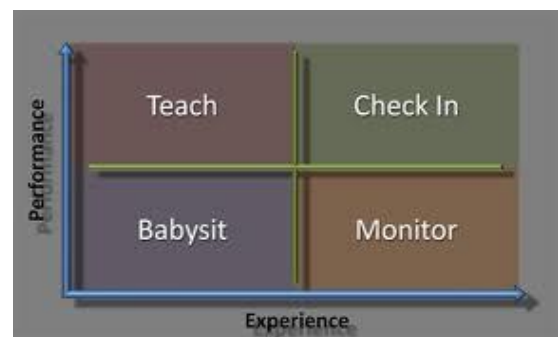
3. **Confusing Communications - The lights are always on.** You are always sending a message with both your words and doubly so with your actions. A leader's words are frequently dissected and are open to interpretation – your actions are much clearer. If you always start your staff meetings five minutes late and tolerate other latecomers – then that is a message that punctuality is not too important.



So be clear in your communications and make sure your team understands what it is that you really want them to do (this also applies to managing up). Be concrete rather than abstract – say “*we need to take 10 minutes out of that piece of the presentation*” rather than “*we need to shorten the presentation*”. If you are in the office before 8am every morning, make sure your team knows that you do, or do not, expect that behaviour from them – you get the idea.

4. **Not Understanding Who The Customer Is.** As a presales leader you actually have multiple customers. Naturally, you have the physical customers who give your company money in return for your services and solutions. They are important and you need to have a relationship with some of your key revenue-generating customers. Never get too far away from the money! Yet your most important customer is actually your own sales force. As a presales leader you need to establish a strong relationship with the sales leaders who manage the individual reps your team works with. The key is making it a partnership as opposed to a subservient relationship. If you don't realize that first and second-line sales leadership can make or break a presales leader you need to go back and think about it.

5. **Giving Orders.** Let your people make their own decisions, instead of double-checking everything with you, or worse still, relying on you for all decisions. Armed forces around the world utilize a concept of **Commanders Intent**, created because no battle plan survives contact with enemy. The intent is “*take that hill using these resources*” – and the leaders in the field have the options of modifying the plan as conditions change to achieve that intent.



The presales version is “*no sales strategy survives contact with the customer / competition*” – so apply the same concept of Commanders Intent. There is a time and place for giving orders, and a time for collecting options from your team – you'd be surprised how often someone comes up with the solution that would have been “yours”.

6. **Losing Sight Of The Fight.** Just a simple first step promotion from individual to manager immediately puts you one level away from what's really happening in the field ("out there in the sharp end" as one presales leader calls it). No one wants to give their boss bad news or a dismal status report, so facts and events begin to be hidden from you. The higher you go, the more is hidden. Do not accept this. Continue to build your relationships with customers, sales and your team. Network, invite people out for breakfast, lunch, ride-along on demos and presentations – don't lose touch with the field. It always used to bother me when an executive flew into my city, sat down with "senior management", gave a canned town-hall speech, and then vanished. I cannot even begin to tell you about the number of things I learnt over a cup of coffee with an SE compared to a group meeting.
7. **Ignoring The Needs Of Your Employees.** How could any manager ignore the needs and desires/plans of their employees? It happens all the time. The worst boss I ever had was known as "Kiss Up, Kick Down". He made himself look like a superstar to upper management, and beat up on his employees. Attrition went up and productivity (revenue) went down.

The #1 objective of any leader is **to develop and serve your people**. Let me put that in perspective. When you have a meeting canceled and suddenly get an hour free on the calendar. That hour should be devoted to your employees. I often hear that "hitting the number" is priority #1 – I consider that as table stakes just to get into the leadership game. You are far more likely to hit the number by making each staff member 20% more efficient, giving them one extra skill and granting them some autonomy than by taking on extra work yourself.

Summary

Think about the best and worst characteristics of all your previous managers. Make a list. That is a great start to positive and negative behavior for any presales leader. You must understand that, especially in high-technology settings, there are many ways to get something done – and only one of those ways is "yours".

"A year from now you may wish you had started today"

Karen Lamb, Author/Journalist

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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ⁱ Mainly Americas and Western Europe. Some of the advice about admitting mistakes and giving orders radically changes in some APJC cultures where face-saving and "reading the air" is vitally important.

ⁱⁱ There is a close correlation with these sins and "The Seven Things That Surprise New CEOs" published in the Harvard Business Review, 2004.