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So You Really Want To Be A Pre-Sales Manager?

The Toughest Job In Sales

“I want to be a people manager”. About 40% of the individuals in every Pre-Sales organization want to manage. It was a common statement I heard in annual reviews and during regular coaching and mentoring meetings with my staff. So if you really do want to be a people manager what should you be doing to stand the best chance of getting that promotion by having someone take a chance on you? This is based on multiple conversations I had, as a former VP of PreSales, with SE’s with about 4-5 years of PreSales but no management experience.

I should also state right up front that I’m not talking about being a player-coach type manager. By that I mean that you are expected to manage a small team of 3-4 people as well as continuing to be the superb PreSales person that you are. Instead of getting the best of both worlds you actually experience the worst. It doesn’t work in sports, it doesn’t work in business and it certainly doesn’t work within PreSales.

- 1. It’s Not About Being The Best SE.** Just because you are the best SE in the company in terms of closing deals, giving great demos and awesome presentations doesn’t automatically qualify you to be a manager. About 30% of new first-time managers fail in their first two years. A major reason for SE manager failure is that you are promoted because you are the best SE, and not necessarily the best potential leader of your peers. Although it is tempting to promote the best SE in the hopes that she will teach the rest of the team how to do exactly what she does – it rarely works out that way.
- 2. It’s The People Skills:** The #1 job of a manager is to serve their people. That means that you are responsible not just for the well-being of your small team, but also for their performance and development. You need to show that you are flexible and adaptable in dealing with people and can think beyond the tactical “*how’s the quarter going?*” To demonstrate these skills means putting together and/or leading a cross-functional team to fix a problem and doing it quickly. This shows that you can be effective in leading within a matrix-style format. I’ve often looked for individuals who can teach and mentor

others – not just the newcomers on the team, but anyone who needs help. Providing adjusting feedback is a critical skill, not just for managers. I’m also on the lookout for people who I think will micromanage their team – a sure recipe for disaster in pre-sales land. I’ve been surprised a few times, but if someone is incredibly detail oriented to the exclusion of the personal touch, and has a directive personality as opposed to a collaborative personality they are unlikely to succeed as a first-line manager.

- 3. It Means Letting Go:** You also have to be prepared to let go of some of your technical skills. You won’t have the time to effectively lead and manage your team and maintain all your technology skills and put them into practice. You are going to have to let go, delegate, and feel good about someone else on your team being the go-to guy for Product “X”. In general, the smaller the company, the tougher it is to let go. How do you prove you can let go? Start by sharing your “toys” and enabling others. If you make yourself irreplaceable as the technical guru or subject matter expert – how are you replaced when promoted? That’s making the decision harder for your senior leadership.

Another aspect of letting go is to stop whining about all the failings of the company to your peers and salespeople. Managers rarely whine and leaders never do. Act the part.

- 4. Above And Beyond.** If there is one thing that can help you stand out from the crowd, it’s going beyond the call of duty. Contrary to popular opinion that does not mean working 60 hours a week and answering email in the evenings and weekends. It’s about looking for gaps and holes in the organization, in processes or in go-to-market strategies and then volunteering to fill them – and having a plan how to fill the hole. Other proof points are standing in for your boss on certain meetings, sitting in on forecast calls, representing your team to product management and marketing. These are all signs of leadership.

- 5. Action vs Numbers.** Mark Hurd, current CEO of Oracle and former CEO of HP, once shook up a team of his managers by telling them *“look – I have no use for you if all you do is report numbers to me. I want you, I need you, to analyze, to interpret, then to take action and only then to tell me how, why and what I need to do.”*

You need to be able to dispassionately view what is happening within the sales and presales teams, and then recommend a course of action even as an individual contributor – that is what I expect from you. If you are smart, if you understand the business, then you will see things senior presales cannot see because they are no longer at the sharp end dealing with individual transactions, customers and salespeople.

- 6. The Relationship With Sales.** The first line SE manager lives and dies based upon their relationship with first-line sales management. A SE manager can have everything else

going for him, but if that sales manager is not supportive of your activities then life will get much harder. Together with the people skills this is the #1 quality I always looked for in a potential manager. Not only for making the manager far more likely to succeed, but also (selfishly) to make my life easier as I wouldn't constantly have to be watching the sales-presales relationship. This is balanced by remembering that the job of PreSales is NOT to make sales happy, it is to make sales more efficient and to blow out the number – therefore making sales happy.

- 7. Have A Plan.** Whenever an SE would tell me that they wanted to move into management I'd always the obligatory *"why do think that"* and *"why do you think you'd be good at it"*. Then I'd follow-up with *"suppose your boss quit tomorrow and I gave you the job, what would you do in the first 30, 90 and 180 days?"*. Only three people have ever had a good and complete answer. Two are VP's themselves now, and one is a Senior Director. Hmm, maybe there is a correlation there? You may feel you are still a year or two out from being ready to manage – what training do you need, what skills can you acquire on the job? Map it out and make a plan!

I got my first management position at age 25. It was an eye-opening and personality-expanding experience I felt unprepared for, even though I was ready to take it on. I believe that being a first-line presales manager is one of the toughest jobs in sales. You need to act tactically, think strategically, deal with (sometimes) prima-donna reps who each have the greatest opportunity in the sales patch, a sales manager under pressure to make the numbers, and your presales team who all have different desires, career aspirations and motivational points. So if you still really want to be a presales manager take note of this advice, take time to put together a plan and start acting the part.

"The conventional definition of management is getting work done through people, but real management is developing people through work."

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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