

GROWING-UP PAINS

STEVE HOYLE highlights the problems of the adolescent sales manager

The adolescent manager is a common phenomenon in sales organisations today. The problems that most companies faced following the crisis of 2008 led to the slimming down of many sales teams and the loss of a lot of experienced sales managers. The subsequent expansion back to normal levels has created a host of new managers over the last few years, many of whom were promoted from capable account managers.

The adolescent manager is normally defined as someone who has got through the first six to 18 months of figuring out what the role entails and getting to grips with the basics of managing a team. As with normal adolescents, at this stage many still inexperienced sales managers imagine that they are very much the finished article. They have the energy that comes with a still new role and are often highly motivated, showing lots of passion for the company and the team. Since they have only recently been promoted they have a keen grasp of the product and company knowledge that their salespeople need in order to be successful and to get things done within their own company. They are confident in their own abilities, almost certainly a good knowledgeable salesperson in their own right, enthusiastic, driven, engaged and generally well motivated.

They are also often over-confident, too set in 'their way' of doing things, too dictatorial or overbearing, don't listen to their team as much as they should, and make glaring mistakes through naivety and inexperience. They suffer from not knowing what they don't know. In particular, they have not yet grasped the real essence of successful long-term sales management – to get salespeople performing at the top of their own game, rather than being mere pawns that the sales manager controls.

The adolescent sales manager can do a good job, normally with a smaller team and particularly with more junior salespeople. Their inability to delegate effectively, or to allow people to make a

few mistakes, means that the team will often become constrained by their ability to control everything personally and in detail (micro-managing), and the team members will stop growing and developing into mature independent salespeople. Those salespeople who are already more experienced will be very demotivated by the adolescent manager's insistence on doing it 'their way'. They will end up either just paying lip service to the manager without having any real respect, or they will undermine them – or they will end up leaving the company. A phrase that might be used by more senior salespeople about an adolescent sales manager is that they are 'losing the changing room', meaning that the manager commands little respect, and receives scant support, from members of their team.

'Many still inexperienced sales managers imagine that they are very much the finished article'

SPOTTING THE ADOLESCENT SALES MANAGER

In sales team meetings:

- They organise the meetings and issue the agenda, with little consultation
- They do too much of the talking
- They neither seek much feedback nor encourage genuine discussion of alternatives
- The sales team find excuses not to attend and, when they are present, are passive and tend not to be enthusiastic.

With customers:

- They often take over from the account manager
- They will often do a good job with the customer, using their product and company knowledge together with honed skills to good effect
- They allow the customer to contact them directly, rather than encouraging contact through the account manager
- They take actions and make commitments without consulting the account manager and with no sensitivity to the wider account situation and account plan.

During business review calls:

- They allow little discussion
- They push all actions and responsibilities onto the salesperson ➤



HARRY'S STORY

Harry has been a very successful account manager in the IT industry for over 12 years. Starting as a junior internal salesperson he worked his way up, making a few, but not too many, job changes and always with good companies that gave him training and, more importantly, opportunity. He has been with his current employer, a mid-sized systems integrator for four years and been very successful – mostly through his hard work and sales skills, but helped by being given some very good accounts to work with.

Two years ago he was asked to become the 'team leader' for two other more junior salespeople. He still had to make his own personal target, but also act as a mentor for the other two. During that time his boss was replaced, new people joined the team and, six months ago, he had found himself as the *de facto* sales manager. He had not had any real training, but his new boss had assumed that he was a good and experienced manager.

Problems had been brewing for a few months, although as most of the salespeople were a little scared of Harry, and the sales numbers were holding up, the sales director was not really aware of the issues.

Eventually, following a training workshop, a number of the more experienced salespeople started voicing concerns about Harry's management style and practices. Comments came back that he was "treating us like children", not listening and just passing on dictats from senior management without offering help, support, guidance or explanation.

The depth of feeling was still being effectively hidden from the sales director until one of the salespeople handed in her resignation. She was a solid, although not outstanding, performer who had been with the company a relatively long time – not the sort of person that you would normally want to leave the team. Initially she had been reluctant to talk about Harry, simply saying that she was going to a competitor who had offered her a better package. It was only when the HR director had interviewed her that

she started to open up and make the company aware that they had a big issue with Harry. He certainly was trying hard, putting in a lot of work, but mostly being the 'super salesman' type of sales manager, not giving the people in his team enough independence, and often appearing to bully individuals into doing things his way. It was quite a revelation to the sales director to hear that Harry, who was very compliant in management meetings, would often rant and rave during team meetings when anyone was not quite performing.

Harry's sales director eventually became directly involved by organising a 'skip level' session with the team (where Harry was not present). It turned out that Harry was exhibiting many of the typical characteristics of an adolescent sales manager. On confronting Harry with his findings, the

sales director was quite taken aback that Harry reacted with a mixture of hurt and annoyance. By discussing the whole situation further, however, it became obvious that events had contrived to put

Harry in a very difficult position.

Harry's journey into sales management had been haphazard. In fact, he had never really made a decision to move from being a successful salesperson – it had just happened. He had been thrown into the deep end with no initial training or support, and his new sales director, being preoccupied with other issues in the organisation, had been blinded to his shortcomings. Harry, for his part, had been too proud to seek help and so had just worked harder and harder, becoming more and more dictatorial over the months, until the situation was brought to a head by the resignation.

Harry's story has a reasonably happy ending, as his sales director put in place a slight reorganisation that meant Harry had a smaller team to manage. He was also given some formal training and an external coach, and the sales director himself took much more of an interest in helping Harry to be successful. It took another six months before Harry's team began to perform properly, and while he now freely admits that he still has a lot to learn, Harry appears well on the way to becoming a more successful and competent manager.

'He never really made a decision to move from being a successful salesperson – it just happened'

◀ ● They often 'rant and rave' when salespeople are not doing what they want them to do (and don't take time to explain the reasons for this).

During one-on-one meetings:

- They do most of the talking
- They start by stating their opinions and views rather than asking questions
- They look at symptoms rather than complex or multiple underlying causes.

During wider management meetings:

- They are only interested in representing 'their' team
- They do not appear to act as a member of the overall management team
- They show little empathy with colleagues
- They never volunteer for anything that is not directly related to their team.

When solving problems:

- They always perceive simple one-dimensional problems
- They are very action-oriented and looking for quick results.

In relationships with other functions:

- They only build relationships or have any interaction when they want something
- They are seen as being 'sales' by other functions
- Their relationships with other functional managers or contributors are generally at a very superficial level
- They will attempt to bully or at least out-rank managers of sales support functions.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT AN ADOLESCENT MANAGER

Most of us at some stage in our careers will work for an adolescent manager and, while not ideal, there are a number of things you can do to make the situation successful:

Enjoy the positives – Energy, enthusiasm, good sales skills, comprehensive and recent knowledge of products and company processes

Accept their shortcomings – It is only natural, and in many ways an adolescent manager is much better than a lazy or out-of-touch manager

Help them develop – Senior salespeople are especially good at managing upwards, and this can include helping your manager to develop – see 'Sarah's Story'

Ensure they get feedback somehow – Often, you will have to go through



someone else – a trusted lieutenant, HR, consultant, trainer, or other manager – where you have a personal relationship. But take care not to be disloyal as the adolescent manager is likely to react badly to this.

WHAT IF YOU ARE AN ADOLESCENT MANAGER?

Each situation is different, but things that you might want to consider include:

- Look at your own performance critically and admit that you are not the finished article
- Look for areas where you are the bottleneck as these are probably the areas where you should delegate more
- Study what other sales (and other) managers achieve and how they go about it
- Get a firm development programme agreed with your boss – recognising areas for development
- Get on a decent management training programme, especially one that will help you flex and adapt your style to the different needs of different situations
- Get a coach or mentor. This should not be your boss. It should be someone who understands your situation, but is not deeply involved in day-to-day issues affecting you. They could be a senior manager within your own company or an independent, external individual.
- Find a way to get team feedback. HR could help, or maybe a member of your team with whom you have a strong personal relationship and who you trust.
- Make sure that you listen to feedback from the team,

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understand their perspectives, and question yourself about how you can improve your behaviours.

Adolescence is a stage that the vast majority of sales managers go through early in their managerial career. It is perfectly natural and often brings a great desire to do the best for the team and maximise performance. The problems come if the manager cannot quickly get through this phase and become much more productive. Becoming a real manager means utilising the strengths of people in the team, rather than trying to achieve results through their own skills and efforts.

SARAH'S STORY

Sarah was a typical adolescent sales manager. She had been top salesperson at her software development company for over three years, and had been adamant that she wanted to move into management. Her motives were unclear to those around her, but she had always had plenty of ambition and drive.

The first few months had been a breath of fresh air to the sales team, as she set about fixing a number of internal issues that had been irritating everyone for a while. Her enthusiasm was infectious and people genuinely wanted her to succeed.

After a few months, however, the situation began to change, and comments could be heard such as, "The power has gone to her head", "She doesn't really understand what it's like to be a struggling new business salesperson", "She was successful but mostly because she had good accounts", and "There are only two ways with Sarah – her way or the way out".

These feelings were becoming more prevalent, with a lot of coffee shop rumour and sniping at her; much of it justified as she was exhibiting many of the traits of an adolescent sales manager.

Fortunately, Sarah had a really loyal friend, Nina, whom she had known for many years, confided in and trusted. Nina was about the same age as Sarah, was a successful account manager, but had no desire to move into sales management. While she worked in a different sales team, Nina was sensitive to the mutterings around the office about Sarah.

Over a number of months, Nina helped Sarah directly, by questioning her about her management style and some particular behaviours. Without naming any names she also questioned the effect that some of Sarah's actions could have on the salespeople in the team. Nina also convinced Sarah to get some good professional basic management training so that she had tools to help her in what may appear to be a simple task, but can be quite daunting to new managers.

Nina also had good relationships with a couple of the salespeople in Sarah's team, and she was very instrumental in helping them to help themselves. Again, while being adamant that she wasn't going to 'defend' Sarah, she did ask her colleagues to try and understand why Sarah behaved in certain ways and that if they could confront her, in a non-aggressive way, about the unintended consequences of some behaviours and how they might impact individual or team performance, then this would help. (Adolescent managers typically don't react well to direct confrontation, so challenging them must be non-threatening and focused on outcomes and results).

Eventually, Sarah was able to get through her 'adolescent phase', becoming much more mature and successful in managing her team.