

Managing a Prima Donna in Business to Business Sales

Most sales managers I know have a love/hate relationship with the prima donnas on their sales teams. They love the star player's passion and hard work. They hate the self-centered behaviors that demoralize or discourage the rest of the team.

That leaves sales managers with a dilemma: If they come down hard on a prima donna, that salesperson may just take his/her talents elsewhere. Not good. But a sales manager can't afford to ignore the situation, either, because prima donnas are often engaged in behaviors detrimental to the team.

A simple truth in sales management is that *what you don't confront, you condone.*

What can you do then? At least part of the solution is for you to look in the mirror and ask, "What possible role did I have in allowing this situation to develop?" And, more importantly, "What changes do I need to make as a leader, going forward, to take advantage of my best people without letting them turn into prima donnas?"

In answering the first question, many sales managers admit that they have taken a hands-off approach with their prima donnas, simply leaving them alone for weeks or months at a time. "Hands off" is a nicer way of saying a "lack of management."

The sales managers will also admit that often they don't communicate performance expectations, or set standards, on anything other than production. And a "standard" is only a standard if you coach to it on an on-going basis. So, naturally, your top producers (and everyone else on the team) think that sales production is the only thing you care about.

A simple truth in sales management is that *what you don't confront, you condone.*



To change the environment that created the prima donna, start by making a list of specific inter-personal “success attributes” that you would like your entire team to adopt. It’s easy to do if you think about what your prima donnas are doing that you don’t like, and write down the opposite behaviors!

Some that I came up with are to “criticize privately, compliment publicly,” “attempt to solve problems yourself before seeking help,” and “Supports others in their attempts to deal with change.” See, it’s easy.

Share this list of “success attributes” with your team, starting with the prima donna. Explain to the prima donna that you’d like him or her to take a leadership role in adopting these behaviors as an example for the team, because everyone looks up to them.

At least, that’s what you tell the prima donna. And don’t worry that they will see through what you’re trying to do! People with bad attitudes don’t usually recognize it in themselves. They are almost always blind to the ways that their own behavior is disruptive to others.

I’m suggesting that you can use *their ignorance to your advantage*. Don’t tell them that they, personally, exhibit these behaviors. Instead, talk individually to a prima donna about how these new success attributes would be important for the entire team to adopt.

Afterwards, talk about the attributes with the rest of the team.

If you still have problems with the prima donna after you’ve taken both of these steps, you need to escalate.

Have a heart-to-heart *positive confrontation* with your prima donna. Provide specific examples of their detrimental behavior and discuss its impact on the rest of the team. Then ask them, “if roles were reversed, how would they feel to be on the receiving end of that behavior?” Communicate the importance of team work, and the important role that they have in the overall performance of the team. Be very clear and specific about your expectations of their personal behavior going forward.

Passionate, hardworking, experienced and talented people deserve to be treated, in some ways, differently. They consider this special treatment a form of recognition. But in other ways—determined by you—they must be treated exactly the same as everybody else.

As a sales manager, the challenges you face are entirely different from the challenges you faced when you were a sales representative. But if you want to create an elite high-performance sales team *you must step-*

Provide specific examples of their detrimental behavior and ask how they would feel if the roles were reversed.

up, and overcome this problem. You must actively manage this situation, and manage *everyone* on your team to your expectations—even a peak performing Prima Donna!

In so doing, you communicate to your entire team that *success is more than a number*. Now, that's Sales Management Leadership!



Kevin Davis, president of TopLine Leadership, is the author of ***Slow Down, Sell Faster! Understand Your Customer's Buying Process and Maximize Your Sales***, available wherever books are sold. His company provides custom workshops based on the "Slow Down, Sell Faster!" sales model, as well as a Sales Management Leadership workshop for sales managers. Contact Kevin through his website at www.toplineleadership.com