

KAREN L. CATES AND BRENDA ELLINGTON BOOTH

Leader as Coach: Restoring Employee Motivation and Performance (B)

Kiera spent most of February and part of March working with her coach and Rudy. He had not given her goals or an action plan, so with the encouragement of her coach, she created her own and shared them with him. She and Rudy edited her document, and by the middle of March, Kiera felt she had a clear understanding of what she needed to do to be a successful sales manager at Safety Supply Company. With a clear plan in place, Kiera thanked Belinda for her help and started moving forward on her own.

Her top priority was addressing the issues with her sales team. Despite the addition of the Chili's account, total sales had remained flat. The numbers were good relative to other offices, but the new account should have increased the top line by 15%. After almost a year spent mostly away from the office, Kiera knew she needed to address some personnel matters that were simmering.

Kiera's View

As Kiera opened the personnel files for the five members of her sales team to review their past performance evaluations and sales history, she thought to herself, "Why has it taken me so long to do this?" The team members ranged from 25 to 35 years old and varied in their approach to sales and in their results, but each was well-trained in selling the company's products.

After she reviewed each salesperson's results, performance reviews, and the accompanying development plans done by her predecessor, Kiera realized it was time for some one-on-one

conversations to get everyone back on track. An outsider who saw only the numbers might not perceive many problems, but her review of the files gave Kiera a different perspective.

The Team's View

Having been without a sales manager for several months before Kiera's arrival, the team was proud that they had maintained their sales numbers. When they heard about Kiera's promotion, they were skeptical that a former peer would have much to offer them. When she jumped into the sales training video project and became the regional meeting planner, they felt their skepticism had been justified.

Kiera's team was frustrated by her frequent absence from the office and her inability to return emails or texts promptly. They felt she did not share important client information she got from other regions. When new online sales tools were launched, Kiera gave them to one or two team members for testing and left the others to wonder what was going on. Some wondered whether this was part of an attempt to increase her power in connection with the sales training video project.

When Kiera was in the office, she held half-day team meetings that reviewed information they already knew from company or office communications, or she talked about her video project and script rewrites. The meetings often were interrupted as she responded to "important" emails or calls, leaving everyone else waiting around the conference room table. Sometimes Kiera even called her salespeople by the wrong name. Half in jest, they started asking each other if she would notice if they switched desks.

Taking Action

Kiera started the one-on-one meetings with each salesperson's past performance review in hand, asking them how they viewed the progress they had made on their development plans. Each person said that so much had changed since those plans had been written, they now seemed obsolete. Taken aback, Kiera followed up by asking for their feedback on her performance as a manager.

After she completed her meetings with everyone on the sales team, Kiera reviewed her notes. Most of the comments were complaints and finger-pointing (mostly at her!), but she felt that the salespeople had become stagnant. Their performance was flat. She decided the solution was to give them proper incentives to increase their numbers.

Given that her team felt their past development plans were irrelevant, she decided to assign stretch goals based on their previous sales. You have to start somewhere and get them motivated to improve, thought Kiera. She didn't expect all of them to reach those goals, but she wanted them to think bigger—much bigger—when working with clients. Next, she created a bonus schedule with percentages that increased as sales approached the stretch goal.

She set up mandatory sales meetings on Monday mornings and Friday afternoons, thinking this would add some structure (and maybe some hours) to her team's work week. Finally, she had

a scoreboard created that displayed each sales team member's sales for the day, week, and month. She hoped some friendly competition would help raise their sales.

In early April, Kiera rolled out the new plan. She thought her team would be happy about the new discretionary bonus schedule. Instead, her top salesperson stayed glued to her phone for the entire meeting. Two of her medium performers took copious notes and looked worried. Her two bottom people sat back in their chairs, arms crossed. One threw his pen onto the table after he saw the new sales goals.

Well, she thought, no one said sales was easy. They needed to work harder and smarter. Kiera ended the meeting with her new catchphrase, "Let's get out there and make people safe!"

The Outcome

In early July, Kiera sighed as she reviewed her team's sales for the second quarter. They should have done better than this, she thought. Her team had in fact increased sales, but only by 7%, not the 15% she had anticipated after rolling out her new sales plan.

Her top performer had hit the stretch goal and earned the highest bonus. The middle two performers had increased their sales by 5% and 10%, respectively, but they earned bonuses that were only 20% and 25%, respectively, of the top salesperson. As for the other two salespeople, one was struggling and had managed only a 2% increase, which Kiera knew could be due more to the sales call cycle than to any real change in effectiveness. The other salesperson had quit in May saying, "There is no way I am going to get any of the bonus money, so why bother?" Kiera was able to promote an ambitious sales support team member into the vacant position, but it was not enough to meet her 15% target.

Frustrated, Kiera called Belinda, saying, "I need help!" She shared her progress and updated Belinda on everything that had happened since their last call, including her team's failure to engage fully with the new sales plan.

After Kiera and Belinda set a new agreement and set new goals around motivating her team, Belinda dove into the coaching process. As always, she got to the point: "I'm curious. How much input did they have into the plan?"

Kiera was confused. "Well, not much," she replied. "That's *my* job; I set the goals and incentives, and they do the selling."

Belinda pressed. "If you were a sales rep and your manager didn't solicit your input about what would be realistic stretch goals, how would you react to such a top-down plan?" she asked.

Kiera opened her mouth as if to reply, but then closed it as she thought about her answer.

As a salesperson, she had been motivated by goals and incentives, but that wasn't working for her team in Dallas. She wanted to fire everyone except her top performer, but she knew it was unlikely she could find four more stars like her.

Slowly, she realized she might need to rethink her approach to managing her team. She had assumed the issue was motivation, a lack of hunger for sales in her team members, but maybe it was something else.

Kiera told Belinda: “I think I need to restart *again*. I could use some help creating a plan to get this office on track. Can you help me map it out?”

Belinda asked, “Where would you like to start?”