The CSO Guide to Increase Sales Manager Focus for Maximum Impact
The frontline sales manager is a critical lever in driving sustained commercial performance for any sales organization. Successful sales managers have to balance many tasks to scale commercial impact across their teams. However, significant changes in today’s buying environment and the internal organization have grown to a point where organizational complexity has diverted sales manager focus away from the priority of driving growth.

External and internal trends such as growing diversity of buyer groups, complex, nonlinear buying processes and more information for both buyers and sellers have added to the already vast responsibilities of sales managers. With every new strategic initiative, tool or policy campaign, sales managers have been forced to turn their attention away from the activities that matter most for commercial success.

By rigorously prioritizing sales manager activities, clarifying the responsibilities of the role and improving coaching, CSOs and sales leaders can guide sales managers to selectively focus their time and attention on the right activities that will drive growth.

Brent Adamson
Distinguished VP, Advisory
Defining where sales managers should focus

Gartner performed a three-part study to gain a 360-degree view of the sales manager role around a key question: What should be the focus of the frontline sales manager role in today’s complex work environment?

Our research identified three critical action areas, each with key findings and questions to consider, to help you support sales manager effectiveness and achieve world-class sales performance:

- **Focus manager time**
- **Focus the manager role**
- **Focus manager coaching activities**
Focus
manager time

“Managers want to act more autonomously ... but it seems like we’re spending more time as managers selling ourselves internally to our own organization than we are selling to the customer.”

Sales Manager, Manufacturing
Focus manager time

The best managers are characterized by where they choose to spend their time. However, choosing to spend their time on a narrow set of activities does not mean high-performing managers are simply ignoring other activities that are part of their job. Rather, they make deliberate trade-offs, overinvesting in a discrete set of activities that provide a disproportionate impact on commercial success.

Key findings

1. High-performing managers maintain an external posture, constantly learning about trying to understand market trends and supporting sellers with customer-facing activities.

2. Given the constantly changing composition of sales teams and buying complexities, managers should overweight helping sellers with deal execution and underweight skill building.

Key questions to consider

- **CSOs**: Are my managers making the right trade-offs in where they focus?
- **Sales enablement leaders**: How do we reinforce manager focus on critical activities?
- **Sales operations leaders**: How can we diagnose where managers spend their time?
Manager time spend across all activities

Percentage of time spend

- Internal focus
  - Reporting: 14%
  - Navigating internal resources: 14%
  - Team management: 13%
  - Selling and closing: 15%
  - Building market expertise: 9%
- External focus
  - Coaching: 21%
  - Other: 14%

Sales leaders’ desired manager time spend

Percentage of time spend

- Internal focus
  - Reporting: 4%
  - Navigating internal resources: 9%
  - Team management: 16%
- External focus
  - Coaching: 34%
  - Other: 4%
  - Selling and closing: 13%
  - Building market expertise: 17%

Managers currently spend about 19% less time performing external-facing activities than leaders want.

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Ineffective sales managers have expensive consequences. Learn how Connector Managers make the most of prioritizing their time.
Focus the manager role

“There were a lot of perceived obstacles and entrenched views. We had to challenge some deep biases to make a real difference in how we conceived of the manager role.”

SVP and Chief Strategy Officer, IT
Focus the manager role

Many of today’s sales managers are overwhelmed by the increasing scope and complexity of their jobs: 76% percent of managers agree their job is either complex or very complex. Just 32% of managers agree that they rarely have to work around organizational processes to get work done.

Our data reveals that this “manager burden” represents a tax on both coaching impact and overall corporate performance. The higher the burden on managers, the lower the commercial performance. An average coach operating in a low-burden environment outperforms a world-class coach operating in a high-burden environment by approximately three percentage points in average quota attainment.

Key findings

1. Manager burden significantly suppresses the impact of organizational coaching investments.
2. Reducing burden requires sales leaders to rationalize complex or conflicting support systems and declare the core activities of the manager role.
3. Sales leaders need to minimize nonessential reporting demands that increase manager burden.

Key questions to consider

- **CSOs:** How should I focus and define the sales manager role at our organization?
- **Sales enablement leaders:** What enablement support is unintentionally burdening managers?
- **Sales operations leaders:** What can we do to minimize the reporting burden on managers?
The burden tax
Change in quota attainment for managers, by level of burden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seller rating of manager coaching effectiveness</th>
<th>Average quota attainment for managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower (Neutral)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.6 (Average)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7 (High)</td>
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- **13 Percentage points**
- **6 Percentage points**

n = 111 sales managers
Source: 2020 Gartner Enhanced Frontline Sales Leader Survey
Note: Quota attainment scores were provided by participating organizations. Scores were centered around the 60th percentile when calculating average centered quota attainment.

Accelerate sales manager performance with data-driven action planning.
Learn more with our Frontline Sales Manager Diagnostic.
Focus manager coaching activities

“Creating a system where managers are better at supporting sellers where they need it most has resulted in significant productivity gains.”

SVP, Sales and Solutions
Focus manager coaching activities

Effective coaching by frontline sales managers is critical to seller performance and organizational success, yet many sales organizations struggle to drive improvement in managers’ coaching behaviors. High-performing managers focus their time and coaching on customer-facing, deal-level activities. They recognize that their objective is to reinforce skills by coaching on these activities rather than being the primary source of long-term skill training for sellers, a role often better suited to sales enablement.

Key findings
1. Managers should target their coaching efforts primarily at core performers. Organizations see an average 8% increase in sales performance from their core performers when supported by better coaching from their managers.
2. An increasingly complex buying environment requires managers to focus coaching efforts on the early- to mid-stage of the sales process.

Key questions to consider
- **CSOs**: How well are we role-modeling great coaching for our managers?
- **Sales enablement leaders**: What are the most urgent coaching gaps for us to close?
- **Sales operations leaders**: How can sales analytics improve coaching effectiveness?
Midstage buying requires more coaching
Ratio of manager coaching allocation across deal stage

All other

High-performing managers

Opportunity creation

Opportunity pursuit

Opportunity closing

Ongoing activities

When last examined in 2005, high-performing managers focused coaching on opportunity creation and closing, whereas today’s high performers focus on opportunity creation and pursuit, likely due to increased complexities in buying.

From traditional to individualized, learn how technology enables sales training and coaching to be effective at scale.
Key take-aways

**Focus time**
- Understand market trends and support sellers’ customer-facing activities.
- Overweight deal execution and underweight skill building.

**Focus the role**
- Rationalize complex support systems.
- Declare core activities of the manager role.
- Minimize nonessential reporting.

**Focus coaching**
- Target coaching primarily at core performers.
- Focus coaching on the early- to mid-stage of the sales process.
Maximize your sales managers’ impact

Simplify focus and prioritize results
Beyond what individual managers can do differently, our data shows it is equally critical for CSOs and sales leaders to reduce the unnecessary burdens managers face that drag down their teams’ performance. Even the best managers struggle to succeed in a system poorly designed to promote their success. Work with us to learn how successful sales leaders enable managers with an organizational ecosystem and role definition that prioritizes focus on activities that drive growth.

Gartner for Sales Leaders
Take advantage of indispensable insights, advice and tools to achieve your mission-critical priorities. As a head of sales, you face a diverse set of complex challenges in generating profitable, top-line growth for your organization. Our tailored service equips you with the strategic advice, insights and practical tools required to cut through common sales and technology challenges and execute the initiatives that are critical to your success.

We can help you to:
• Prioritize investments to improve productivity
• Adapt to rapidly changing buying behaviors
• Stay ahead of industry trends so you are prepared to tackle challenges before they hit
• Drive digital business transformation