



The **Sales**  
**Manager's**  
**Guide**  
to  
**Greatness**

**10 Essential Strategies for  
Leading Your Team to the Top**

Kevin F. Davis

## Advance Praise

“I’m always excited about books that help managers become true leaders—and *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* is one of those books. In it, Kevin Davis describes the full range of skills and mindsets needed to be an effective leader and coach. Read this book and learn how to lead your team to the top!”

—**Ken Blanchard**, Coauthor, *The New One Minute Manager*<sup>®</sup>  
and *Collaboration Begins with You*

“This really is an excellent piece of work. I like very much the way Kevin has created a one-step-at-a-time plan, guiding both novice and experienced sales managers alike through a program of self-improvement. This ensures that managers are not overwhelmed by attempting to implement too much, too quickly. This should be a must-read for all managers who have an ambition to develop into genuine leaders.”

—**Linda Richardson**, Founder of Richardson;  
Best-selling Author; Consultant;  
Faculty, Wharton Graduate School

“I’ve seen firsthand the positive impact that Kevin Davis’ approach can have on sales management teams. The *Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* provides a practical sales coaching system that can be immediately implemented by sales management at all levels to create greater success.”

—**Roy Chestnutt**, Executive Vice President &  
Chief Strategy Officer, Verizon Communications

“Adapting to the changing demands of buyers is forcing the evolution of the sales manager. In *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness*, Kevin Davis shows us how to integrate traditional performance management with new strategies for developmental coaching. That’s the best way to equip our teams to win.”

—**Joe Galvin**, Chief Strategy Officer, Vistage Worldwide

“*The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* is a highly valuable book for sales managers and those who develop them. The book’s formal integration of the buyers’ perspective into the sales process is especially useful, and its strategies for developing a consistent and formal coaching process are top-notch. Both of these pillars have to be in place to improve sales performance consistently, according to our research at CSO Insights.”

—**Tamara Schenk**, Research Director, CSO Insights:  
Research Division of Miller Heiman Group

“Frontline sales managers are the most important lever for leading change in a sales organization—yet most companies still don’t adequately prepare them. In *The Sales Managers Guide to Greatness*, Kevin Davis provides practical, actionable, and proven-effective content to help you prepare and enable your sales managers to be the proactive, productive leaders and sales coaches they need to be, to get the results you want from your sales force.”

—**Mike Kunkle**, Senior Director of  
Sales Readiness Consulting, Brainshark

“*The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* provides a powerful message for any leader whose success is determined by their team’s sales performance. We’ve measured not only an improvement in our sales managers’ skills but, more importantly, a positive impact on our sales force and bottom-line results.”

—**Jim Ferguson**,  
VP of Sales, Holland Transportation

“This fast-moving, practical book shows you how to immediately boost the performance and productivity of every salesperson. It will make you look like a genius!”

—**Brian Tracy**, Author,  
*The Psychology of Selling*

“Everyone knows that the effectiveness of a sales manager is the biggest factor determining a team’s success. In *The Sales Manager’s Guide To Greatness*, Kevin Davis describes 10 practical strategies that sales managers can use to elevate their own game—and create a champion team.”

—**Mark O’Leary**, VP of Enterprise,  
Western Division, Comcast Business

“We all accept—at least I hope we do—that the sales management function in every company is now pivotal to the overall success of the organization. The sales team is the offense and if they are not scoring consistently then the team has a very bleak future. However, in order to maintain optimum performance levels the team needs a strong leader and coach. Therein lies the challenge, because we believe that 80% of managers lack that capability. *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* provides a superb route map, which is easy to follow and implement. This is not a book to be read just once and put on the bookshelf; rather, it is genuinely a guide which should be referred to daily until the skills are fully adopted.”

—**Jonathan Farrington**,  
CEO, Top Sales World;  
Executive Editor, *Top Sales Magazine*

“If your sales force isn’t producing the results you need them to, it isn’t likely that it’s because they are poor performers. It’s more likely that they need to be better led. The coaching section in *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* alone will help you remedy this problem—and faster than you’d believe. Read it now, and implement it immediately.”

—**Anthony Iannarino**, Author,  
*The Only Sales Guide You’ll Ever Need*

“*The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* debunks the myths surrounding what it takes to be a great sales manager once and for all and offers clear solutions and takeaways. This is more than a book—it’s your map to success.”

—**Mark Hunter**, author of *High-Profit Prospecting*

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Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press  
Austin, Texas  
[www.gbgroup.com](http://www.gbgroup.com)

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Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group  
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group

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Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 978-1-62634-388-7

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62634-389-4

Audiobook ISBN: 978-1-62634-423-5

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

17 18 19 20 21 22 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Acknowledgments xvii

Introduction 1

The Impact of Effective Sales Coaching

What's in This Book

Rising to the Challenge

## **Section 1: Self-Leadership**

Overview 11

Chapter 1: Embrace a Leadership Mindset 15

War #1: Player vs. Observer

War #2: Closing vs. Coaching

War #3: Tasks vs. People

War #4: Results vs. Inputs

Developing Your Leadership Mindsets

What Contributions Do You Value in Yourself?

Chapter 2: Take Control of Your Time and Priorities 29

Skill 1: Escaping the Reactive Trap

Skill 2: Focusing on Priority #1

Skill 3: Become a Master of Time Management

Now, About Your Leadership Destiny . . .

## **Section 2: Elements of Excellence**

Overview 53

Chapter 3: Drive Rep Accountability for Breakthrough  
Sales Performance 55

Raising the Bar

Defining Skills for Excellence

Defining "Wills" for Excellence

Creating and Using a Success Profile

Accountability for the Future

<b>Chapter 4: Hire Smarter</b>	<b>71</b>
Asking the Right Questions	
Evaluating Cultural Fit	
The Importance of Wills and Coachability	
The Hiring Process	
Making the Call	
Getting the Right People on Your Bus	
<b>Chapter 5: Insert the Customer in Your Sales Process</b>	<b>89</b>
Staying with Tradition: A Selling-Focused Sales Model	
A More Effective Approach: Buying-Focused Models	
A More Effective Sales Playbook	
A Buying-Focused CRM	
The Improved Predictability of a Buying-Focused Funnel	
The Benefits of a Buying Focus	

## **Section 3: Priority #1: Coach and Develop Your Team**

<b>Overview</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Become a More Strategic Coach</b>	<b>115</b>
Strategic Coaching	
The Ballad of Willy Sellmore (or why it's a bad idea to "never give up")	
Finding the Right Balance with Top Performers	
Triaging Your Coaching Time	
The Strategy of Effective Coaching	
<b>Chapter 7: Commit to Consistent Coaching</b>	<b>131</b>
The C.O.A.C.H. Model	
<b>C</b> .O.A.C.H. = Commit	
C. <b>O</b> .A.C.H. = Observe	
C.O. <b>A</b> .C.H. = Assess	

C.O.A.**C**.H. = Consult

C.O.A.C.**H**. = Help

A Model of Consistent Coaching

**Chapter 8: Motivate the Demotivated 151**

Motivators and Demotivators

Lessons from the Wrong End of Poor Coaching

Scenario 1: Re-energizing a Good Rep Gone Stale

Scenario 2: Dealing with the “Uncoachable” Prima Donna

Scenario 3: Encouraging a Disillusioned Beginner

Scenario 4: Confronting Continuing Problems

Your Own Moment of Truth

**Chapter 9: Increase Win Rates with  
Buying-Cycle Coaching 175**

Creating a Buying Perspective

Early-Cycle Sales Coaching

Changing the Coaching Conversations

Improving Your One-on-One Monthly Reviews

What Happens When a Deal Is Lost?

Getting in Sync with Buying and Selling

**Section 4: Taking Action**

Overview 199

**Chapter 10: Shape a Championship Strategy 201**

Setting a Breakthrough Goal

Focus and Urgency

Planning: Turning Dreams into Actions

Measuring Progress

The Three Questions that Matter Most

Index 217

About Kevin F. Davis 221

## Chapter 6

# Become a More Strategic Coach

I'd been managing a single sales team for two years at the point that I was transferred to a different office and put into a general manager position. It was, for me, a big promotion. My responsibility included oversight of two sales teams, plus field service and office admin/support. Like any new manager, I was determined to start off on the right foot.

The general manager before me had left a bit of a mess as far as the sales teams were concerned. He had been something of an arrogant micromanager, and one of his sales managers had quit about six months prior. Then the general manager was de-hired and I was brought in.

My new boss told me that I needed to focus my attention first on getting the two sales teams back on track. My plan for my first hundred days included spending about 80 percent of my time working in the field with salespeople. I needed to observe and assess our people prior to making any personnel decisions.

The good news was that there were a few successful salespeople, a small nucleus that I could build a team around. The bad news was that the micromanaging predecessor had been a “desk jockey,” and the salespeople were in bad need of direct sales coaching.

To help me get a general sense of one team's status, after doing some initial ride-alongs, I rated each rep on their overall skill and will levels using a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).<sup>18</sup> You can see the results in Table D. The people in this scenario are all real, though obviously I have disguised their identities.

Table D: Example Sales Team

Name	Skill	Will
Ann T. Oxidant	5	5
Clare Voyant	2	3
Sal Monella	3	5
Willy Sellmore	2	2
Carlotta Tendant	5	2
Al Fresco	4	4

Knowing that Ann (first row, best ratings) would hit her numbers without help from me, I subsequently spent much of my coaching time through the rest of those first hundred days doing ride-alongs with people like Willy Sellmore, whose name reflects the question in my brain every time I talked with him—*will he sell more?* On those rides, I heard a lot of excuses from Willy, Sal, and Clare, all of whom had been on the job less than 12 months, about why their sales numbers were low: “Our product line sucks.” . . . “Our service department is slow.” . . . “Our pricing is too high.” . . . “Our competition is discounting.”

If you had a team like this, what would you do first? What

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18 In Chapter 3, I talked about the helpfulness of rating reps on individual skills and wills to help identify development needs. This situation was different in that I just wanted to see where the team stood overall.

strategies would you employ? Would you work most with Willy and Clare? Focus your time on helping Ann and Al close their big deals?

Before I discuss what I ended up doing with this team, let me first provide a little background on effective coaching strategies. I'll then use the team ratings table to illustrate how those strategies work out in real life, and finally summarize some principles for triaging your valuable coaching time.

## Strategic Coaching

When it comes to coaching, most sales managers have natural instincts to either **rescue the worst players** (because obviously they need the most help) or **gravitate to the best players** (because they will likely have the biggest, most exciting deal opportunities).

If either of these sounds like you, the results of a study reported in the *Harvard Business Review*<sup>19</sup> might come as a surprise.

In research involving thousands of reps, we found that coaching—even world-class coaching—has a marginal impact on either the weakest or the strongest performers in the sales organization. You'd think that coaching the lowest performers would pay off because they have nowhere to go but up. Actually, that's often not true, particularly for the bottom 10 percent. These reps, we've found, are less likely to be underperformers who can improve, and more likely to be a bad fit for the role altogether. That's not really something coaching can fix. It's likely a different kind of conversation altogether (often involving HR).

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19 Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, "HBR Blog: The Dirty Secret of Effective Sales Coaching," *Harvard Business Review*. January 31, 2011. <https://hbr.org/2011/01/the-dirty-secret-of-effective>

Likewise, star-performing reps show virtually no performance improvement due to coaching either. While our research shows that there are some important retention benefits from coaching your high performers, it would be nice to think that great coaching (especially from former high performers) makes your stars just a little more stellar. But that's just not the case.

Our conclusion? The real payoff from good coaching lies among the middle 60 percent—your core performers.

That's right. Your biggest payoff from coaching will come from working with the people you might think of as your "B" players. Your mindset needs to be focusing your one-on-one coaching time on the people with the **biggest potential**, not those with the biggest problems or biggest deals. I call these people the **high-payoff coaching candidates**. Spending time with the high-potential people will have a much bigger impact on your team's performance. It is also a way to give your "A" players more competition!

That's why I suggest doing one more tweak to the rating approach by looking at overall **competency** (skill) and **coachability** (will) ratings for your reps (Figure 17), perhaps once or twice every six months.

Figure 17: Competency & Coachability Ratings

	<b>Sales Competency</b>	<b>Coachability</b>
Name 1		
Name 2		
Name 3		
Name 4		
Name 5		

There are several uses for this table. You can, for instance, sort everyone in rank order from highest to lowest so you have a semi-objective way of identifying your best and worst performers. You can use these ratings to identify the coaching needs for each rep. Do they just not have the skill or knowledge to do a better job, or do they know what to do but lack the will or attitude to make themselves successful? Have they improved in the last few months or are they stagnating?

More specifically, you can use the table to identify the high-payoff coaching candidates—the people who have low to moderate skill but high will (or coachability), and therefore where your one-on-one coaching time will have the biggest impact. Table E, for example, is the sales team I referenced earlier, this time with Sal Monella highlighted. At the time, he had only a moderate skill level but was very eager to learn, so I knew that devoting one-on-one coaching time to him would likely be high payoff.

Table E: High-Payoff Coaching Candidate on My Sales Team

Name	Skill	Will
Ann T. Oxidant	5	5
Clare Voyant	2	3
<b>Sal Monella</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
Willy Sellmore	2	2
Carlotta Tendant	5	2
Al Fresco	4	4

As an aside, I encourage you to take good notes on *why* you're giving people specific numbers. First and foremost, these notes will be important in determining what actions you want to take with

a sales rep; that is, what does each person need to improve to get better in their ratings? You can also use the notes when you have one-on-one coaching discussions with reps, a subject I address at length later in the book. Most reps I know are eager to get helpful feedback (though they don't relish after-the-fact criticism that doesn't help them improve). So use your notes to talk about specifics with your reps and share your ideas on what each person needs to get better.

Second, the notes will reveal what your approach to coaching has been (what do you pay attention to? how have you been assessing your people? are you being a developmental coach or a performance manager?). Now that you have a general sense of rating your team, I want to pick up a theme from Chapter 1 on how sales instincts can work to the detriment of effective leadership.

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### A report card on YOU!

By rating your salespeople, what you've really done is given yourself a grade in terms of *your effectiveness as a sales coach*. If there are common problems across the team, what do you have to do to get better so that your team can get better?

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## The Ballad of Willy Sellmore (or why it's a bad idea to "never give up")

Winston Churchill, the great British leader during World War II, was widely revered for being an inspirational figure during some very difficult times. British citizens heard the message to "never give up" even during the darkest days of the war.

That kind of tenacity is very valuable in salespeople; it makes them

persist and win more deals. But when present in a sales manager, a potentially damaging effect occurs when we hang on to low producers too long. We don't want to give up on people we hire, even if they turn out to be a poor performer.

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, nearly every sales manager I meet agrees that there is someone on the team that in hindsight they would not have hired. And they've often known the person was a bad fit for many months if not years. In other words, the typical sales manager is holding on to a Willy Sellmore, the one rep they know is not *and never will be* a good fit for the team.

What I want you to do is think a little more deeply about what impact this has on your team.

Take my inspired-by-reality sales team, for example. When presented with this team's ratings (Table F), most managers tell me they would focus a lot of coaching time on Willy and Clare. But as the research I just presented demonstrates, that is a low-impact strategy.

Table F: What to Do with a Poor Performer?

Name	Skill	Will
Ann T. Oxidant	5	5
Clare Voyant	2	3
Sal Monella	3	5
Willy Sellmore	2	2
Carlotta Tendant	5	2
Al Fresco	4	4

Think of it this way: What label does Clare Voyant give to Willy Sellmore? The answer is “job security.” As long as Willy is allowed

to remain on the team, even though he has the lowest ratings (and hence the worst sales numbers), Clare can be pretty sure she will not be the next person to be fired! She is not thinking about success and achievement; she is thinking, “I’ve just got to be a *little bit* better than Willy.” And as a sales manager, you have to ask yourself if that is an acceptable standard of performance for your sales team.

What should you do instead? Generally, I recommend doing *group* coaching on skills and wills (instead of one-on-one). But if nothing changes, then you should **cut your losses** sooner rather than later. Recent research shows just what a terrible mistake it is to keep someone with a poor attitude on a team: Just one bad apple on a team can reduce the overall team performance by 30 percent.<sup>20</sup>

Knowing what I know now, for example, I would have let Willy Sellmore go (“de-hired” him, in the modern jargon) far earlier than I did in reality. Allowing him to stay on the team set a bad example for everyone and gave the others a safety cushion that removed an incentive for them to improve.

You are responsible for keeping your salespeople focused on the behaviors you need them to perform to achieve sales success. You are responsible for making sure your team members aspire to high standards. If you see something happening that is not successful, you must address the issue now.

## Finding the Right Balance with Top Performers

I know I just told you that working with your “B players” should be a top priority and the research I cited said there was little impact from working with top performers. And earlier in the book I advised against falling victim to the instinct to chase big deals.

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20 For example, see Robert Sutton’s “How a Few Bad Apples Ruin Everything,” *The Wall Street Journal* (October 24, 2011), which cites a number of studies.

Yet at the same time, I don't think any sales manager should leave their "A players" alone entirely, for two reasons.

First, there's no such thing as perfection in our profession any more than there is in any other profession. Top producers often got into selling so they could have a lot of independence in how they work. They don't usually seek help, especially if good results provide validation that they are doing things right. Their sales managers—always former top sales performers themselves—tacitly agree with that interpretation. The underlying assumption is that top performers are as good as they can get.

But one thing we know about success is that it can blind us to opportunities to get even better. In his 2007 book *The Science of Success*,<sup>21</sup> Charles Koch, CEO of Koch Industries, writes, "Given human nature, we tend to become complacent, self-protective, and less innovative as we become successful. It is often more difficult to overcome success than adversity."

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### Be a role model for seeking and accepting feedback

I recently saw a comment on a management blog from a top performer who wrote that he'd be leery of accepting advice from managers who thought they were always right. He would be more likely to seek out and accept advice from a manager if that manager had asked *him* for input on how to improve. So don't try to wrap yourself in an aura of perfection. If you are willing to learn how to get better, so will your top performers.

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21 Charles G. Koch, *The Science of Success: How Market-based Management Built the World's Largest Private Company* (Wiley, 2007).

Second, your top performers can set the tone for your team around both skills and will. If *they* have the attitude of always striving to get better, their success example will provide inspiration for the entire sales team.

With that in mind, there are two particular coaching strategies that I think are good for keeping your top performers at the peak of their game.

### **1. Consistently enforce standards**

The book *Wooden*,<sup>22</sup> the autobiography of John Wooden (legendary UCLA basketball coach), has over 200 brief anecdotes from Wooden's life. One that I find informative involves Wooden and Bill Walton, the team's All-American star player. At the time, there was a rule banning facial hair for players on UCLA's team. After a 10-day break, Walton came to practice with a beard. Coach Wooden asked him if he was forgetting something.

Walton: "Coach, if you mean the beard, I think I should be allowed to wear it. It's my right."

Wooden: "Do you believe in that strongly, Bill?"

Walton: "Yes, coach, I do. Very much."

Wooden: "Bill, I have great respect for individuals who stand up for those things in which they believe. I really do. And the team is going to miss you."

Bill went into the locker room and shaved off his beard.

Wooden writes, "There were no hard feelings. . . . I wasn't angry and Walton wasn't mad at me. He understood that the choice was between his own desires and the good of the team. I think if I had given in to him I would have lost control not only of Bill but of his teammates."

To me, the most important lesson from this story is that the team

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22 John Wooden (with Steve Jamison), *Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court* (Contemporary Books, 1997).

had standards that were *equally enforced* no matter the status of the player. You must have the same attitude.

## 2. Develop another Bell Cow

In my original team, Ann T. Oxidant served as a pretty good Bell Cow—someone who is a leader and whom others follow and emulate. But because the only other top seller, Carlotta, had such a poor attitude, Ann didn't have much competition—and I always like having a little pressure on my top performers. The best sales teams I have ever been a part of had competition at the top; there was more than one peak performer and they were competing with each other, way above sales quota.

None of the other original team members could step into that same Bell Cow role, however, or they were unwilling to do so (Carlotta). So after I de-hired Willy Sellmore, I hired Ivan Inkling, who, as you can see (Table G), rated very high on willingness even though his skill set was low.

Table G: Who Is Ann's Competition?

Name	Skill	Will
Ann T. Oxidant	5	5
Clare Voyant	2	3
Sal Monella	3	5
Carlotta Tendant	5	2
Al Fresco	4	4
Ivan Inkling	2	5

I devoted a lot of coaching time to Ivan, and he learned very quickly, putting in a lot of hard work. Soon, he was second only to Ann in both his ratings, outdistancing even Sal (the other high-payoff coaching candidate). That not only gave Ann some competition but motivated Carlotta to change her attitude as well!

This strategy of developing team leaders and Bell Cows is tried and true. Coaches know that leadership is tied not only to how long a player has been around, but also to how that person produces and how he or she interacts with others on the team. Salespeople take their cues from another peer, not management.

Your responsibility is to make sure that the person seen by your team as their role model is a positive role model, not a negative one. You can find an example of this in the book<sup>23</sup> and movie *Moneyball*, the story of how Oakland Athletics general manager Billy Beane (played by Brad Pitt in the movie) turned around the team's seasons-long losing streak to set an American League record by winning 20 consecutive games during the 2002 baseball season.

There's a scene in the movie where Beane approaches one of his experienced players, David Justice, who was practicing alone in the batting cage. Up to this point, Justice had been more of a lone wolf, perhaps bordering on what I'd call a prima donna. Beane says, "David, I need you to step up and become more of a leader of this team. Make an example for the younger players. Check in with them, see how they're doing and help them more." Beane was asking Justice to become his team's Bell Cow. Justice proceeded to do what Beane asked, and in doing so helped propel the team on a record-setting roll.

Look at your own team right now and figure out who has the greatest potential to be developed into a Bell Cow.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Michael Lewis, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).

24 Whenever I discuss this topic in a seminar, often someone brings up the classic "Cow Bell" skit from *Saturday Night Live!*, starring Will Ferrell, Christopher Walken, and Jimmy Fallon. The lesson from that skit is quite different, which I discussed in a blog post: <http://toplineleadership.com/sales-team-need-cowbell-2>

## Triaging Your Coaching Time

The popularity of TV medical dramas has made the concept of **triage** more widely known in the public. The generic meaning of “triage” is to sort or sift items so you can assign priorities and resources to projects or people. That’s what I want you to do with your team; sort your team into different categories based on what type of coaching intervention will represent the best use of your time.

I’ve summarized my approach to triaging a sales team in Table H. The table recaps the three strategies previously discussed in this chapter (working with high-payoff candidates, dealing with poor performers like Willy, and creating Bell Cows), and includes a fourth category, the troubled talent. This category represents someone who was once a good producer, but whose results have fallen off and they show no motivation to improve. Dealing with low willingness is the subject of Chapter 8, so you’ll find more details there about how to deal with that kind of rep.

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### What about new hires?

If you’ve done a good job of hiring (see Chapter 4), a new rep should be low to moderate in skill level, but hopefully very high in willingness (if not, why did you hire that person?). All new hires deserve your time and attention. Make sure they get the training and coaching they need to become quickly integrated and profitable. Perhaps after the “second hiring date” (see p. 86), you could start to include them in the table of ratings with the rest of your team.

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## The Strategy of Effective Coaching

The main point of this chapter is that coaching time is a resource that needs to be managed. It needs to be allocated carefully according to your priorities. Unfortunately, the reps who are the most in need of you are probably not the reps you should be spending most of your time with. In fact, quite possibly the team members who are the least demanding of your time and attention are the ones who would benefit the most from your coaching. So if you just follow your instincts—whether it's to work with top performers or bottom performers—you will not be using your coaching time most effectively. However, while the players on your team won't all need the same kind or amount of coaching, everyone will need *some* attention from you.

Keep in mind that the initial goal here is to develop the players on your team, not punish or reprimand them. A great sales manager is one who gives every person a chance to improve, but does not tolerate poor or mediocre results for too long.

Table H: Triage Strategies

Category	Skill	Will	Description	Development strategy
The high-pay-off coaching candidates	Lo / mod	Hi	Persons of low to moderate skill but who are very coachable.	Use most of your one-on-one time with this group. Their willingness to learn means they are more likely to listen to and implement your advice.
Your best Bell Cow(s)	Hi	Hi	The person with the highest ratings in both categories. Can serve as a role model for the team.	Engage this person in becoming a mentor and role model for the team. Ask them to help develop a playbook or other best practices documents.
The troubled talent	Hi	Lo	A person who has a lot of skill but either never had or has lost their will to support the team or the company.	One-on-one coaching on skills won't work, so the focus has to be on motivation and engagement. An example conversation with someone in this category is shown in Chapter 8.
A problem performer	Lo	Lo	A person who has received adequate training and coaching but has a poor attitude.	The impact of improvements will likely be minimal in terms of your team's achievement. You don't want to ignore these reps (every employee deserves your attention) but find ways to leverage your time. For example, work with them as a group. If there is no improvement, then use the "confronting problem performer" technique in Chapter 8.

# About Kevin F. Davis

Kevin F. Davis is the president of TopLine Leadership Inc., a leading provider of customizable sales and sales management training programs targeted at helping clients drive consistent sales growth.

Kevin has more than 30 years of experience, having worked his way up from sales rep, to sales manager, to general manager. He therefore understands the particular challenges faced when transitioning into management and when transitioning to managing managers. Kevin continues to draw on his firsthand experiences to help his clients remove barriers in the way of great success.

Under Kevin's guidance, TopLine helps sales managers organize their priorities—separate out the merely urgent from the truly important—to elevate overall performance and boost efficiency. Sales managers discover how to transition their coaching style from one that primarily judges lagging indicators to a more balanced approach that includes proactive developmental coaching.

TopLine's salesforce programs are focused on establishing a consistent, repeatable sales process and sales funnel linked to the buying process. This helps sales reps develop more effective sales strategies, be more effective in every customer meeting, and be more accurate in predicting deal closings.

Kevin is the author of two sales books: The first, *Getting Into Your Customer's Head: 8 Secret Roles of Selling Your Competitors Don't Know*, was selected as one of the top 30 business books of 1996 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries. The second, *Slow Down, Sell Faster! Understand Your Customer's Buying Process and Maximize Your Sales* breaks the entrenched myth that a faster sales pitch leads to a faster close.

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