EXECUTIVE RESEARCH BRIEFING / 2027

Bold Value Partners

THE SALES LEADERSHIP CEILING

WHO'S CARRYING YOUR SALES TEAM?

What Research Reveals About How Sales Manager Training and Sales Coaching Impacts Repeatable Growth



The Sales Leadership Ceiling ›

What It's Costing You ›

Raising the Middle 60% ›

Find Your Leadership Gap ›

WALT MELCHER CEO | BOLD VALUE PARTNERS

THE RESEARCH PAPER / OCTOBER 2026

By Walt Melcher | CEO, Bold Value Partners | Author of the forthcoming book *Bold Value Selling*

Quick Read: Is Your Busiest Person Your Biggest Bottleneck?

Monday starts with a leadership meeting and a deal that needs rescuing. By Tuesday, the sales manager is chasing pipeline updates and approving discounts. Wednesday brings a personnel issue and helping prepare for a big pitch that can make the quarterly number, Thursday a customer escalation, and Friday a forecast that still surprises leadership. The manager is working harder than ever, yet too much of the team's success still depends on them.

Most CEOs and sales leaders will recognize this week. Few recognize what it costs.

WHAT IS THE SALES LEADERSHIP CEILING?

The Sales Leadership Ceiling is the limit that a sales manager's capability and capacity place on a sales team's performance and growth. It rises when companies invest in sales manager training and sales leadership development that build the skills to manage execution and coach for high performance.

A sales team's ability to perform consistently is heavily influenced by the capability of its manager. When the manager spends too much capacity carrying deals, solving problems, and directing individual salespeople, the team's growth becomes increasingly dependent on that manager. Most sales managers receive little sales-manager-specific training, whether they were promoted from sales or hired from outside, so the company sets the ceiling. Managers equipped to coach with a consistent rhythm develop salespeople who perform at higher levels and more independently, which increases the organization's capacity for repeatable performance.

THE RESEARCH SHOWS HOW MUCH THE SALES MANAGER MATTERS

2.34×

Sales results. In a study of salespeople at 214 firms, the same salesperson produced about 2.34 times the output under a top-quartile manager that they would under an average manager, and about half under a bottom-quartile manager.

The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 2019

28%

Revenue growth. Consistent sales coaching is associated with 28% higher quota attainment and 32% higher win rates.

Korn Ferry

Top 3

Turnover. Manager quality ranks among the top three reasons inside sellers look for a new job, and replacing a seller can cost one-half to two times their annual targeted earnings.

Gartner

60%

Preparation. Only 60% of organizations have a dedicated training program for sales managers, and only a third of those delivered training in the past year.

SBI, 2025

Who's Carrying Your Sales Team?

In many small and midsized companies, a few people carry the sales number on a team: the sales manager, one or two top performers, and often the CEO or someone else from the senior leadership team is brought in to support it.

That arrangement can produce strong quarters. It also makes growth fragile, because results depend on how much those few people can personally handle.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME PROBLEM

THE CEO'S QUESTION

"I have a sales manager. Why am I still involved with managing sales?"

They hired or promoted a sales leader to create leverage, yet they still get pulled into important opportunities, pricing decisions, and difficult salesperson situations.

THE SALES MANAGER'S QUESTION

"How do I get my team performing without personally driving every deal?"

They are rescuing deals, filling pipeline gaps, and answering every escalation, while the coaching they know matters slips to next week.

Research suggests organizations often reinforce the problem. Gartner's 2026 research found that 63% of chief sales officers and senior sales leaders rank selling and closing as a top activity where managers should spend their time. More than half of managers say their day-to-day responsibilities differ completely from their formal job description.

What happens when your top two performers carry the team?

At Bold Value Partners, we regularly see small and midsized sales teams where two experienced salespeople produce a large share of new revenue. The CEO knows it, and so does the manager. The risk becomes visible when one of them leaves, slows down, or loses a major account.

The larger cost shows up more subtly. When a manager's time goes to supporting stars and rescuing deals, the middle 60% of the team, the group with the most room to grow, receives the least development.

The question for leadership is whether your team's results reflect a repeatable system or the heroics of a few people.

Why Does the Sales Leadership Ceiling Exist?

Most sales managers never receive training built for the sales manager's job, whether they are new to sales management, have led teams for years, or were hired from outside.

They figure the role out on their own, repeat what the previous manager did, or follow the president's or CEO's suggestions. Each path can produce a capable manager, yet none is grounded in research-backed practices of high-performing sales managers.

How many companies train their sales managers?

41%

of companies allocated no budget for sales manager training.

Sales Management Association, 2016

60%

of organizations have a dedicated sales manager training program.

SBI, 2025

1 in 3

of those programs delivered training in the past 12 months.

SBI, 2025

In 2016, the Sales Management Association found that 41% of companies allocated no budget for sales manager training, and half of the rest offered only generic management courses. The picture has improved only modestly. SBI's 2025 survey of 134 commercial leaders found that only 60% of organizations have a dedicated training program for sales managers, and only a third of those delivered training in the past 12 months.

The type of training matters as much as the amount. A Sales Management Association and Vantage Point study of 213 companies and 25,800 sales managers found the highest-impact topics were the ones closest to the manager's real job: assessing salesperson performance, managing pipeline, and forecasting.

What happens when top sellers become managers?

Research on sales promotions shows why this matters. A 2019 study of 214 firms in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* found the best sellers were the most likely to be promoted into management. Doubling a new manager's pre-promotion sales was associated with a 7.4% decline in each team member's sales performance, while managers with more experience collaborating with colleagues produced stronger team results.

Selling success and management success draw on different capabilities. Without preparation for the second, a strong seller can become an overextended manager.

Why don't sales managers coach more?

The role itself crowds out coaching. Gartner's 2026 research attributes frontline manager underperformance to role overload. In a Korn Ferry poll, 80% of sales leaders said their organization had no formal sales coaching process, or an inconsistent one.

THE TWO LUMBERJACKS

A famous parable captures what we see in many sales managers. Two lumberjacks arrive at the same time each day, saw large trees, and leave at the same time. Lumberjack A cuts down more trees every day, even though he leaves for an hour each afternoon. Lumberjack B saws all day and barely meets his quota. Finally, B asks A where he goes. "I go sharpen my saw," A says.

At Bold Value Partners, we see many sales managers who are very good at managing activity and fighting fires. That skill keeps them so busy that they rarely take time to sharpen their own saw. The result is a manager who works harder each quarter while the team's capability stays the same.

What Is Your Sales Leadership Ceiling Costing You?

The ceiling on a manager's skills becomes a ceiling on new revenue: the deals your team should have won, the opportunities never developed, and the salespeople who never reached their potential.

For a small or midsized company, that gap can reach millions of dollars. The research shows how wide the performance gap can be:

55.2%

win rate on forecast deals with a dynamic coaching process, versus 41.8% where coaching was random.

CSO Insights, 2019

+28%

higher quota attainment and 32% higher win rates with consistent sales coaching.

Korn Ferry

45%

of sales leaders and sellers have high confidence in their forecast accuracy.

Gartner

How much revenue could stronger sales leadership add?

Consider this example: a manufacturer with $150 million in annual revenue and $30 million in qualified new-business pipeline each year. Its sales team wins 30% of qualified opportunities. If stronger sales leadership raised that win rate by five points, the impact would look like this:

	Current	With a 5-point win-rate gain
Qualified pipeline	$30.0M	$30.0M
Win rate	30%	35%
New revenue won	$9.0M	$10.5M
Annual difference		**$1.5M**

Over three years, that is $4.5 million in revenue from the same pipeline, the same salespeople, and the same market. A five-point gain is a fraction of the 13-point difference CSO Insights observed between dynamic and random coaching.

The hidden cost sits on both sides of the business. The president or CEO loses predictable growth and spends time inside the sales function. The manager loses the time and credibility to lead, and the team's best potential performers stay in the middle.

The Transition From Heroic Management to Systemic Execution

Heroic management means the manager wins by personally rescuing deals; systemic execution means the team wins by following a shared sales process the manager coaches every week.

The first depends on one person's capacity. The second builds capacity across the whole team.

HEROIC MANAGEMENT

The manager rescues deals, answers every escalation, and carries the number. Results depend on one person's capacity.

→

SYSTEMIC EXECUTION

The team follows a shared sales process the manager coaches every week. Capacity grows across the whole team.

What the president or CEO needs

The president or CEO needs results that hold when the manager is on vacation, a top performer leaves, or a large deal slips. That requires a consistent way of selling that every salesperson follows and every manager

coaches. Korn Ferry found that teams with more than 75% adoption of a dynamic sales methodology achieved 21% higher quota attainment and 15% higher win rates.

What the sales manager wants: "Get my week back so I can coach"

Most sales managers already know coaching matters. Gartner's 2025 research found managers lack the time or the insight to coach effectively. The path to reclaiming time starts with a clear definition of the manager's job, since managers with a clearly defined role have 3.2 times the impact on seller performance (Gartner).

In practice, systemic execution looks like this:

- A defined sales process with clear criteria for advancing each opportunity.
- Weekly coaching built into the one-on-ones and team meetings already on the calendar.
- Deal support reserved for the opportunities where the manager's involvement changes the outcome, with a coaching conversation attached so the salesperson handles the next one.

Ending the Forecast Roller Coaster Through Objective Inspection

Forecasts swing when they rest on salesperson optimism; they steady when managers inspect every opportunity against the same evidence of sales activities completed and buyer commitment.

Objective inspection turns the pipeline review from a status report into a coaching conversation.

What the president or CEO needs

The president or CEO makes hiring, spending, and expansion decisions based on the sales forecast. Yet only 45% of sales leaders and sellers have high confidence in their organization's forecast accuracy (Gartner). A forecast that surprises leadership at quarter end costs more than one missed number. It erodes leadership's confidence in the sales function.

What the sales manager wants: "A team that fills its own pipeline"

Managers want salespeople who generate their own qualified opportunities and advance them without constant prompting. Those capabilities grow from the same habits that steady the forecast: consistent, evidence-based questions about each opportunity, asked every week until salespeople ask them of themselves.

The research supports this focus. Pipeline management and forecasting rank among the highest-impact topics in sales manager training (Sales Management Association and Vantage Point), and CSO Insights found organizations with a dynamic coaching process achieved a 55.2% win rate on forecast deals, compared with 41.8% where coaching was random.

In practice, objective inspection looks like this:

- Clear CRM criteria for advancing a deal to the next funnel stage, based on what the salesperson has uncovered to build the business case and what the buyer has committed to.
- The same short set of questions applied to every opportunity in every review.
- Pipeline reviews that end with a coaching point, so each salesperson leaves able to advance the deal and build the next one.

A QUESTION LEADERS OFTEN ASK US

Leaders often ask us how many funnel stages to build into their CRM and what criteria to apply to each one. What many small and midsized companies miss is that funnel criteria and pipeline reviews go hand in hand, and both depend on how well each salesperson executes the team's agreed-upon sales methodology. For example, if a team applies the Bold Value Method and a salesperson rates a deal as likely to close soon but hasn't yet defined the customer's Full Value Gap, that confidence rating is probably too high. When a sales manager asks the right questions in every pipeline review to validate where each deal sits in the funnel, the forecast holds fewer surprises, and the manager knows exactly what to coach to strengthen that salesperson's skills for the next opportunity.

Raising the Middle 60% to Reduce Talent Fragility

A sales team is fragile when results depend on a few stars and underperformers are replaced instead of developed; it grows stronger when managers coach the middle 60% to perform at a higher level.

That shift protects revenue, reduces turnover costs, and strengthens the team's culture.

What the president or CEO needs

Up to 19%

performance improvement for core performers, the middle 60% of a sales team, from effective coaching.

CEB, now part of Gartner

240%

more likely: newer salespeople becoming top performers with an effective manager.

RAIN Group

The president or CEO needs a team whose results hold when people change. Research from CEB, now part of Gartner, found effective coaching can improve core performers, the middle 60% of a sales team, by up to 19%, while it has marginal impact on the strongest and weakest performers. Development also compounds for

newer salespeople, who are 240% more likely to become top performers with an effective manager (RAIN Group).

The hidden cost of "fire and replace"

Turnover comes from two directions. Some salespeople leave because they are frustrated. Gartner found that 89% of sellers reported feeling burned out, with lack of clear manager feedback among the key sources, and sellers in that state show higher intent to leave and lower quota attainment.

Others leave because the manager pushes them out. At Bold Value Partners, we see many small and midsized companies where the manager's mindset is sink or swim: when a salesperson underperforms, the answer is more activity, then termination and a new hire with a better track record. That approach is expensive. Gartner clients report that replacing a seller can cost one-half to two times the seller's annual targeted earnings, before counting lost pipeline, ramp time, and customer relationships that walk out the door.

The cost reaches beyond the sales budget. A hard-nosed, old-school approach that demands more activity without coaching exactly what needs to improve damages the team's culture and its reputation inside the company. In many companies, employees in customer service, operations, or engineering are anxious about moving into sales. When the sales team is known for developing people, those same employees aspire to join it, which gives the company an internal talent pipeline it can grow from.

> **Replacing a seller can cost one-half to two times their annual targeted earnings. Coaching them to improvement protects revenue, culture, and the team's reputation inside the company.**

What the sales manager wants: "A coaching playbook"

Most managers who default to fire and replace were never shown a better way. They need a practical playbook: a way to observe what a salesperson is doing, diagnose the root cause of a performance gap, deliver specific feedback, and follow up in a steady rhythm. With those tools, a manager can coach an underperformer to improvement, or reach a well-documented decision when someone is the wrong fit.

How Do Sales Managers Go From Firefighter to Growth Multiplier?

Raising the ceiling requires building sales leadership capability in a sequence, where each level gives the manager the capacity to succeed at the next.

Training on isolated skills rarely changes how a manager spends the week. A progression does, because it frees time first and then invests that time where it produces the most growth.

THE SALES LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY MODEL



Level 3, Performance Coaching, is the heart of the model, where the team's performance changes most.

LEVEL 1: LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

The manager learns when to manage and when to coach, protects time for the activities that drive the greatest results, especially developing people, and builds a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. This level gives the manager back the hours that firefighting consumes.

LEVEL 2: SALES EXECUTION SYSTEM

The team follows a consistent approach to developing, evaluating, coaching, and forecasting opportunities. Pipeline reviews become coaching conversations, and forecasts rest on evidence. This addresses the president's or CEO's most persistent question: will we hit the number?

LEVEL 3: PERFORMANCE COACHING

This is the heart of the high-performing model. The manager diagnoses the root causes of skill, motivation, and execution gaps, then coaches through a steady rhythm built into the one-on-ones and team meetings already on the calendar. Short, consistent touchpoints tend to produce more momentum than occasional long sessions. The result is salespeople who win more consistently with less reliance on their manager, and a bench of future leaders developed from within.

LEVEL 4: SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

With a stronger team in place, the manager enables greater sales results by aligning marketing, operations, customer success, and technical experts behind important opportunities, then translates company goals into pipeline, win-rate, and activity targets. A 90-day operating rhythm keeps progress visible to leadership.

What changes for the president or CEO and the sales manager?

For the president or CEO, the payoff is more predictable revenue and less time spent inside the sales function. For the manager, it is a team that performs more independently, pipeline reviews that build momentum, forecasts they can deliver with confidence, and more time back to lead.

What Should a CEO and Sales Manager Ask Before Next Quarter?

Before investing in another sales tool, hire, or incentive, the president or CEO and sales manager can test their leadership ceiling together.

Set aside 30 minutes, review last quarter's calendar and pipeline, and answer these three questions honestly:

1. **Who carried last quarter's number?** List the deals the president, CEO, or sales manager personally rescued, and the share of new revenue produced by your top two salespeople. Would the result hold if any of those people walked away?
2. **Did every salesperson receive structured coaching each week?** Look for coaching built into one-on-ones and team meetings, with a clear focus and follow-up, as distinct from deal updates and status checks.
3. **What would a 5% gain in win rate be worth?** Multiply your annual qualified pipeline by 5%. Compare that figure with what your company invests each year in developing its sales managers.

> **If the answers point to a few people carrying the team, you have identified where your growth ceiling sits, and the first place to raise it.**

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Where Is Your Sales Leadership Gap?

This 12-question self-check shows where your sales leadership ceiling sits.

Check Yes or No for your sales team as it operates today. Your totals update automatically. Presidents, CEOs, and sales managers can complete it separately, then compare answers.

QUESTION		YES	NO
Level 1: Leadership Foundation	YES COUNT	0	
1. Our sales manager spends more time developing salespeople than rescuing deals.		☐	☐
2. Our sales manager has protected time each week for coaching.		☐	☐
3. Our team holds itself accountable to shared goals without constant follow-up.		☐	☐
Level 2: Sales Execution System	YES COUNT	0	
4. Our salespeople follow a consistent approach at every stage of the sales process.		☐	☐
5. Our pipeline reviews improve how salespeople advance deals, beyond reporting status.		☐	☐
6. Our forecast rarely surprises leadership at quarter end.		☐	☐
Level 3: Performance Coaching	YES COUNT	0	
7. Our manager identifies the root cause when a salesperson struggles.		☐	☐
8. Every salesperson receives structured coaching at least weekly.		☐	☐
9. Our salespeople win consistently without the manager or CEO stepping in.		☐	☐
Level 4: Sustainable Growth	YES COUNT	0	
10. Marketing, operations, customer success, and technical experts support our important deals.		☐	☐
11. We are developing future sales leaders from within.		☐	☐
12. Our sales manager translates company goals into pipeline, win-rate, and activity targets.		☐	☐
Your totals		0	0

Reading your results: Count your yes answers in each level. The level with the fewest yes answers is usually the best place to start, because each level gives the manager the capacity to succeed at the next one.

Find Your Sales Leadership Gap

Take the full assessment and see where to start raising your team's ceiling.

Take the Full Assessment →

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Sales Leadership Ceiling?

The Sales Leadership Ceiling is the limit that a sales manager's capability and capacity place on a sales team's performance and growth. When managers spend most of their time carrying deals and fighting fires, team results depend on what the manager can personally handle.

Why do top salespeople often struggle as sales managers?

Selling and managing require different capabilities. Research on 214 firms found the best sellers were the most likely to be promoted, and their teams' sales tended to decline. Managers with collaboration experience produced stronger team results.

Does sales manager training improve sales results?

Research associates structured manager development with stronger performance. SBI found companies with structured manager enablement reported a 7% increase in quota attainment, and CSO Insights found a dynamic coaching process associated with a 55.2% win rate on forecast deals, compared with 41.8% where coaching was random.

How much time should a sales manager spend coaching?

The research emphasizes consistency more than total hours. A steady weekly rhythm of short coaching conversations, built into existing one-on-ones and team meetings, helps every salesperson receive structured coaching without overloading the manager's calendar.

Who should coaching focus on?

CEB research found effective coaching improves core performers by up to 19%, with marginal impact on the strongest and weakest performers. Prioritizing the middle of the team often produces the largest gain.

Who is this research written for?

CEOs, presidents, VPs of Sales, and sales managers at small and midsized companies who want growth that depends less on a few people and more on a team that performs consistently.

Research Sources and Notes

The cited studies involve different populations, years, and methods, and most report associations rather than proof of cause. The illustrative financial example is not an observed customer result. Interpretations and original concepts, including the Sales Leadership Ceiling, are those of Walt Melcher and Bold Value Partners.

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