



SHOULD A SALES MANAGER BE LIKED?

THE SCIENCE OF MANAGEMENT LIKEABILITY

SYNOPSIS

This white paper answers the highly debated question, “Should a sales manager be liked?” With poignant wit and keen insight a compelling case is presented which reveals that likeability is a prerequisite for effective sales management. First, evidence is presented that clearly demonstrates that leadership is a relationship. Then an explanation is given regarding why management likability is so debated and often misunderstood. The whitepaper concludes by focusing on the essence of likeability and answering the question of why likability is an imperative for a sales manager.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Hoffeld is CEO of the Hoffeld Group, a research based sales training, coaching and consulting firm that is the leader in the integration of proven science and sales. The Hoffeld Group takes the proven science of influence out of the laboratory and academic journals and applies it to selling. For a deeper look at the Hoffeld Group’s groundbreaking research and innovative sales strategies visit HoffeldGroup.com.

Why Follow The Leader

Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones wrote in the Harvard Business Review that “If you want to silence a room of executives, try this small trick. Ask them, ‘Why would anyone want to be led by you?’”¹

In the past, what qualified someone as being able to lead was thought to be a combination of intelligence, education and personality. However, with the substantial amount of research that has been conducted regarding what makes a leader effective, we now know that leadership is not about checking off a list of traits, skills or educational accomplishments. Leadership is far more dynamic than that.

Leadership used to be defined more by a title and had a “do-it-because-I-say-so” tone. This is no longer the case. Nowadays, this type of leader has become a dinosaur.

- Dr. Robert Cialdini addresses this mentality when he asserts, “Playing the ‘Because I’m the boss’ card is out. Even if it weren’t demeaning and demoralizing for all concerned, it would be out of place in a world where cross-functional teams, joint ventures, and intercompany partnerships have blurred the lines of authority. In such an environment, persuasion skills exert far greater influence over others’ behavior than formal power structures do.”²
- Professors James Kouzes and Barry Posner further illuminate this idea when they affirm, “Leadership may once have been conferred by rank and privilege. It may once have been something that was characterized by a command-and-control, top-down, do-as-I-say style. But no more. Those days are long gone. Today, leadership is only an aspiration. It is something you have to earn every day, because on a daily basis, people choose whether or not they’re going to follow you.”³

The overarching characteristic of great sales managers is that their sales people want to follow them. This is a pivotal concept for sales managers to cognitively grasp and respond to appropriately. Regardless of how much formal authority one has, effective leadership demands that others want to be in a relationship with you. Make no mistake, if sales people do not want to be led by their sales manager, they will not be. In fact, a simple, yet insightful definition of leadership is that leadership is the relationship between those who desire to lead and those who are willing to follow.⁴

1 Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones. “Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?” Harvard Business Review, September – October, 2000.

2 Robert B. Cialdini. “Harnessing the Science of Persuasion.” Harvard Business Review, October, 2001.

3 James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. Credibility. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011). p. 2.

4 Michael Maccoby. “Narcissistic Leaders.” Harvard Business Review, January-February, 2000.

Sales managers can only manage effectively when they capably tend to their relationships with their sales people. This is not mere management theory, but a foundational component that distinguishes mediocre sales managers from elite sales managers.

- A survey which was presented to 2,000,000 employees at over 700 American companies, posed a multitude of questions that sought to identify the specific factors that both create employee engagement and demotivate employees. The responses exposed that the #1 factor that determines both the length of time an employee chose to remain at an organization and their level of productivity was the quality of the employee's relationship with his or her supervisor.⁵
- Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill states that even the smile or frown of a manager can have an effect upon subordinates.⁶
- A study conducted by Bain & Company identified that good relations between an employee and his or her immediate superior can increase effectiveness, while poor relations can hinder employee performance by a staggering 25%–50%.⁷

The Debate of Management Likeability

More evidence could be shown to further demonstrate the fact that the relationship between a sales manager and a sales person is an enormous influencer on the success of both parties. However, the pertinent question of how do you create a positive and productive relationship between a sales manager and a sales person must be discussed. Though there are numerous strategies and principles that could be shared, one of the most fundamental is that a sales manager should be liked by his or her sales team. Now, I recognize that there is robust debate surrounding this topic. Many strongly object to such a view. The objections to likeability as a viable management strategy are derived from the following two misconceptions:

Misconception #1: Some contend that if a manager focuses on being liked it will become a hindrance to getting results. The fear is that these managers will desire to be liked to such an extent that they will refuse to share bad news or discuss a behavioral issue with a sales person.

The flaw in this contention is that it argues from an extreme position. It ignores the subject of management likeability and instead focuses on the fanatical manager who has such a hyperactive

5 Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee. *Primal Leadership: Realizing The Power of Emotional Intelligence*. (Boston: Harvard Business Press. 2002). p. 83.

6 Linda Hill. *Becoming a Manager*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press. 2003). p. 188.

7 F. F. Reichheld with T. Teal. *The Loyalty Effect: The Hidden Force Behind Growth, Profits, and Lasting Value*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996). p. 1.

drive to be loved that he or she shirks responsibilities and is rendered ineffective. This excessive mindset goes far beyond a sales manager being likeable. This condition describes a fragile sales manager who is looking to his or her sales team to meet his or her emotional needs. Although, I would also emphasize that this situation does not negate the necessity for a sales team to like their sales manager. Rather, it is simply a commentary on why it is problematic for a sales manager to attempt to have his or her emotional needs met by a sales team.

Misconception #2: A common argument in opposition of the necessity of management likeability is summarized in the widespread, yet nauseating management expression, “I don’t care if people like me, as long as they respect me.” This statement is nothing more than demonstrated ignorance. It contributes little more than the revelation that the one uttering the expression has a shallow understanding of human relationships. As Kouzes and Posner affirm, “When we talk to people about the leaders they admire—the ones they’d stay up late for, the ones they’d bust their butts for, the ones they’d die for—we never, ever hear anyone tell us, ‘Well I hated that woman, but I’d follow her to the ends of the earth!’ Or, ‘He was a real jerk, but I sure was inspired to do my best for him!’”⁸

False Dichotomy: The basis of the, “I don’t care if you like me, just respect me” declaration is that a sales manager must choose between being liked or respected. This is a false dichotomy. Cannot a sales manager be both liked and respected? Why must a sales manager choose? The reality is that if sales people do not like their sales manager they will not want to work for him or her and this lack of desire will hinder productivity.

Why Management Likability Matters

To truly get to the root of why management likability matters, there is an essential question that must be asked and answered. The question is, “what does it mean to like someone?” This is an imperative question because it is often a misunderstanding of its answer that creates confusion. For example, some sales managers have adopted the belief that being liked is a limitation. They contend that if their sales people like them they will be perceived as being weak. Yet, this assumption is not only false, but it is dangerous.

Liking someone entails that you enjoy being in a relationship with that person. It is those positive feelings that one has for another that encompass what it means to be liked. Accordingly, liking someone ultimately comes down to how that person makes you feel. When it comes to sales management, being liked is not a luxury. To the contrary, it is paramount for effective leadership to occur. This is due to the fact that, as previously shown, leadership is relational. When people don’t like one another they do not respond positively to that person. The focus is on getting away from

⁸ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. *A Leader’s Legacy*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006). p. 57.

the other person, not on productively collaborating together to work towards a common goal. In addition, sales people will always work harder for a manager they like, than one they do not.

There is also a large and growing amount of scientific research that has proven that likeability amplifies positive influence.^{9 10 11} Behavioral scientists refer to this as the Halo Effect.

Halo Effect = the natural human tendency to interpret a person's behavior in light of the overall impression of the person.

This is why when a sales manager, who is disliked, offers advice to his or her sales team, the sales people will usually interpret the advice in a negative way, which reduces the likelihood that they will embrace it.

Edward Thorndike was the first social psychologist to formally research the Halo Effect. It was through his research, which was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 1920, that the Halo Effect was given its name.¹² Since that time, researchers have vigorously studied this phenomenon and today, the Halo Effect is a well-established scientific principle. As Nobel Prize winning cognitive psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes, the halo effect is “a common bias that plays a large role in shaping our view of people and situations.”¹³

The Halo Effect is the science behind why management likeability is so important. It speaks to the quintessence of what management is: getting things done through other people.

- As researchers Amy J.C. Cuddy, Matthew Kohut and John Neffinger explain, “A growing body of research suggests that the way to influence – and to lead – is to begin with warmth. Warmth is the conduit of influence: It facilitates trust and the communication and absorption of ideas.”¹⁴
- The Harvard Business Review published the results of a study that analyzed the traits of 51,836 leaders. The research concluded that only a meager 27 of the leaders were rated in both the bottom quartile for likability and the top quartile for overall leadership effectiveness. This

9 J. M. Burger, S. Soroka, K. Gonzago, E. Murphy and E. Somervell. “The effect of fleeting attraction on compliance to re-quests.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 2001. p. 1578 – 1586.

10 G. Marwell and D.R. Schmitt. “Dimensions of compliance-gaining behavior: An empirical analysis.” *Sociometry*, 30, 1967. p. 350 – 364.

11 Jonathan K. Frenzen and Harry L. Davis. “Purchasing Behavior in Embedded Markets.” *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 17, 1990. p. 1 – 12.

12 Edward Thorndike. “The Constant Error in Psychological Ratings.” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 4, 1920. p. 25–29.

13 Daniel Kahneman. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. (New York: Farr, Straus and Giroux, 2011). p. 82.

14 Amy J.C. Cuddy, Matthew Kohut and John Neffinger. “Connect Then Lead.” *Harvard Business Review*, July – August, 2013. p. 56.

means that the probability of a manager being strongly disliked and still being a productive leader is about 1 in 2,000.¹⁵

A sales manager's likeability has been shown to affect subordinates' work ethic and loyalty. Top sales people will not want to work for a sales manager they do not like being around. This is especially problematic because elite sales performers always have a plethora of employment options and it is the sales manager who, more than any other factor, determines whether a sales person will remain loyal to an organization or attempt to flee from it.

- Research published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* revealed that job satisfaction is directly linked to how employees feel about their work.¹⁶
- Gilt Groupe CEO, Kevin Ryan, asserts that the ability of his company to retain top talent is largely dependent upon his managers. Ryan explains, "Conventional wisdom is that people leave jobs mainly because they don't like their managers. That's also true. We did exit interviews when people left... and they were almost always leaving because of a manager."¹⁷ The truth is that sales people rarely leave a company; they leave their manager.

In contrast, leaders who are liked empower those around them to perform at peak levels. These leaders are known for getting the best out of those who work for them. This is why one common characteristic of top leaders is that they are liked by those whom they manage.

A prime example of this occurred when the US Navy conducted extensive research regarding what made some of their leaders more effective than others.¹⁸ Researchers studied the traits of the naval leaders who led the highest rated squadrons and those leaders who commanded under-performing squadrons. In the analysis of both groups, the difference in leadership styles became apparent. The leaders of the top-performing squadrons created a positive emotional tone. Though they were decisive, action oriented leaders they also were likable. They were described as:

- Sociable
- Gentle
- Trustworthy
- Democratic
- Appreciative
- Fun

Those who served under these leaders reported that they genuinely liked them.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 56.

¹⁶ Cynthia D. Fisher. "Mood and Emotions while Working: Missing Pieces of Job Satisfaction?" *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 21, 2000. p. 185 - 202.

¹⁷ Kevin Ryan. "How I Did It... Gilt Groupe's CEO on Building a Team of A Players." *Harvard Business Review*, (January-February, 2012). p. 46.

¹⁸ Wallace Bachman. "Nice Guys Finish First: A SYMLOG Analysis of U.S. Naval Commands," in Richard Brain Polley et al.(eds.), *The SYMLOG Practitioner: Applications of Small Group Research*. (New York: Praeger, 1988).

In contrast, the naval leaders who lead the under-performing squadrons had chosen to embrace the, “I don’t care if you like me, just respect me” mentality. These leaders were described as:

- Harsh
- Demanding
- Egocentric

As a result, those who served under them confirmed that they did not like being around them.

The research revealed that this dislike for their leader hindered the effectiveness of the squadron, ultimately rendering these leaders inadequate. The conclusions of the research demonstrated that even in the US Navy’s spirited culture, a leader’s likeability matters. In fact, it matters a great deal.

Summary

The research overwhelmingly confirms that when sales people look favorably on their sales manager their performance is enhanced. They work harder, are more creative and have increased productivity in comparison to those sales people who work for a manager they dislike. When a sales manager is not liked it is a red flag because it usually means that the manager’s behavior is demotivating his or her staff. In other words, the disliked sales manager is not an effective leader and is simply bad for business. So should sales managers be liked? The answer is a resounding yes.