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Closing the Training Gap for Frontline Sales Managers

Summary

Most companies are falling short on one of the most critical levers for improving seller performance — training frontline managers. Roughly 40% of teams have no dedicated sales manager training program. Of those that do, just a third deliver training to all managers consistently.

Teams that have dedicated sales manager programs typically see higher rates of sellers achieving quota – as much as seven percentage points more - and are more likely to consider their managers as effective at managing sales performance.

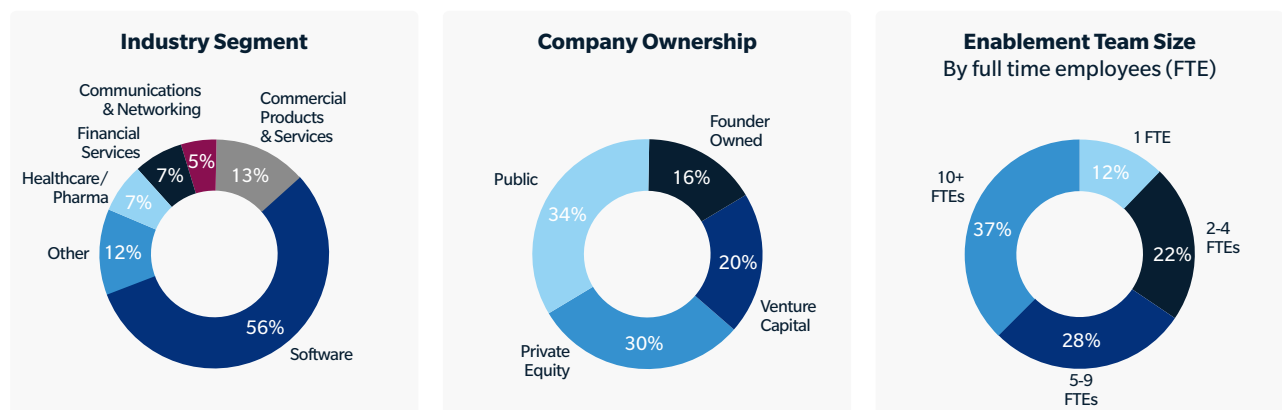
We recommend four actions enablement leaders should take now to close the gap on manager training and increase the effectiveness of the frontline:

1. Stop allowing short-term priorities to serve as obstacles to training sales managers.
2. Treat managing sales performance and sales coaching as distinct and address both for effective manager training.
3. Devote time to technology training to ensure productivity gains from new technologies are fully captured.
4. Don't rely on coaching playbooks as the sole reinforcement mechanism; use job aids, content refreshes, and process enhancements built into sales tools and CRM.

About this research

In partnership with the Revenue Enablement Society (RES), we surveyed 134 commercial leaders in public and private companies to understand how enablement teams are addressing sales manager skill development.

Special thanks to RES for their support and contribution to this work.



N=134 sales organizations in public and private companies in the US surveyed in September 2024

Being a frontline sales manager has never been more challenging.

The role of the frontline sales manager has always been difficult. Sales managers play an outsized part in the success of the entire commercial team. They are the first layer of support for sellers and the tip of the spear for the CRO's strategy, often acting as a linchpin on initiatives from marketing, customer success, and other functions that require collaboration with the sales team. While being a sales manager has traditionally been tough, both **internal and external pressures are creating unprecedented challenges for today's frontline leaders.**

Navigating more difficult sales. Sales managers are operating in an increasingly complex buying environment. Lingering market uncertainty due to stubbornly high inflation, historically low unemployment, and an unpredictable political climate are exacerbating already highly scrutinized buying processes. SBI's surveying of B2B buyers found that sellers must now contend with an average of twelve stakeholders on most buying teams and as many as seven change events per cycle, all contributing to peak levels of friction in the average buyer journey. Managers are expected to successfully shepherd their teams through markedly more difficult sales, while simultaneously being the eyes and ears of senior leaders searching for the right strategies to win in shifting economic conditions.

Driving commercial efficiency. With most companies still hampered by slower growth over the past few fiscal years, frontline managers are also feeling internal pressure to cost-efficiently raise productivity. Following a wave of workforce reductions in 2023 at many big tech companies, hiring has slowed for GTM teams across industry segments. More sales managers are being asked to reach growth targets with the same or fewer headcount. Moreover, senior leaders are increasingly expecting the adoption of generative-AI to further decrease seller headcount in the future. Our recent polling revealed the portion of CEOs anticipating a reduction in sellers due to AI is now 30%, up from 14% just a year earlier. Sales managers will have little choice but to drive greater commercial efficiency with smaller teams using unfamiliar tools and workflows that are still taking shape.

Adopting new, AI-infused technology. Compounding matters for sales managers, technology for white-collar work is changing faster than possibly any time since the rise of the internet in the early 1990's. Driven by the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), sales managers are now expected to expertly use a growing set of tools with automation and reporting capabilities. These tools make it easier to gain visibility into seller behaviors and make it feasible for managers to quickly assess pipeline health and other critical KPIs. But they come with a learning curve and significant time required to gain real ROI from the superpowers they confer. Without guidance on how to leverage new tools in the sales tech stack, managers will consider them just another burden akin to updating CRM.

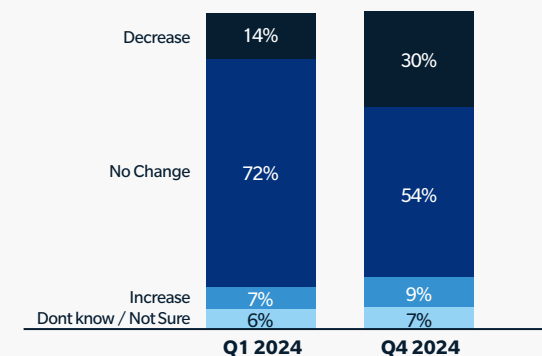
Given the increased complexity of most buying cycles and the rapid introduction of new sales technologies, it has never been more urgent for companies to develop and nurture the competencies of sales managers. Yet we see many firms

Select Factors Increasing Deal Complexity



N = 643 B2B Buyers
Source: SBI 2024 Buyer Survey

CEOs' Expectations of Generative AI Impact on Headcount Needs for Sellers / AEs By quarter



Q1 2024 N = 87; Q4 2024 N = 120
Question: What do you anticipate as the impact of generative artificial intelligence tools (e.g., ChatGPT) on your headcount needs in the following commercial areas by the end of 2025 [in Q1 2024 survey] / the beginning of 2026 [in Q4 2024 survey]?
Source: SBI Q1 2024 CEO Survey; SBI Q4 2024 CEO Survey

struggle to successfully deliver training for the frontline. To better understand how modern enablement teams are addressing skills development for frontline sales managers, SBI and the Revenue Enablement Society (RES) studied training practices in 134 commercial organizations. **This report examines the challenges enablement leaders face when upskilling frontline managers, the impact of manager training on seller productivity, and what commercial leaders can do to improve returns from investments in manager training programs.**

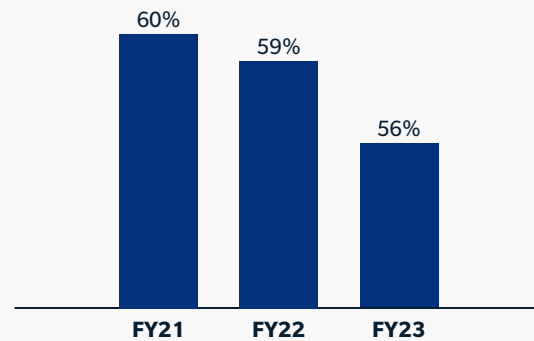
Most companies are falling short on frontline manager training.

For many of today's frontline sales managers, the hiring frenzy of 2021 offered their first opportunity to lead a team. Having worked diligently to be top sellers while casually demonstrating leadership potential, they made the leap to management just before markets tumbled. Growth slowed dramatically in 2022 at most firms, putting seemingly every deal at risk. Instead of easing into the managerial role, focused on mastering the fundamentals, these first-time managers found themselves backsliding into negotiating their sellers' opportunities through several quarters of declining quota attainment.

This has coincided with a surprising lack of training specifically targeted to turning these star sellers into star managers. When targets are in jeopardy, it's easy to see how senior leaders encourage frontline managers – many of whom were A-player sellers - to get into the weeds on every deal, neglecting skills development in favor of team performance. This story rings true for sales managers regardless of their current tenure. Once a seller is promoted to a management role, most organizations fail to meaningfully continue skills training.

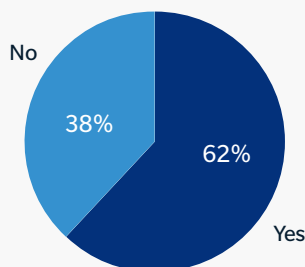
While nearly every enablement team (96%) in our recent study reported functional responsibility for seller training, we found roughly 40% of teams have no dedicated sales manager training program. Frontline managers in these organizations likely attend seller training with their teams but are not necessarily receiving instruction on the essentials of sales management, e.g., sales coaching, managing seller performance, or recruiting top talent. Moreover, for those that do have a dedicated program for frontline sales managers, only a third (34%) accomplished training for all managers in the most recent 12-month period. Despite their intentions, these teams still failed to deliver training consistently.

Mean Portion of Sellers That Achieved Quota in FY21-FY23



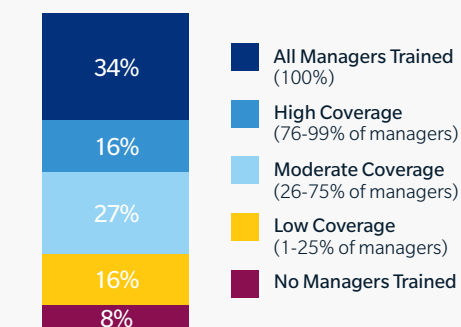
N=134 sales organizations in public and private companies in the US

Portion of Sales Teams with Dedicated Training Programs for Sales Managers



N=134 sales organizations in public and private companies in the US

Portion of Sales Teams Reporting Sales Manager Training in the Last 12 Months
By portion of managers trained



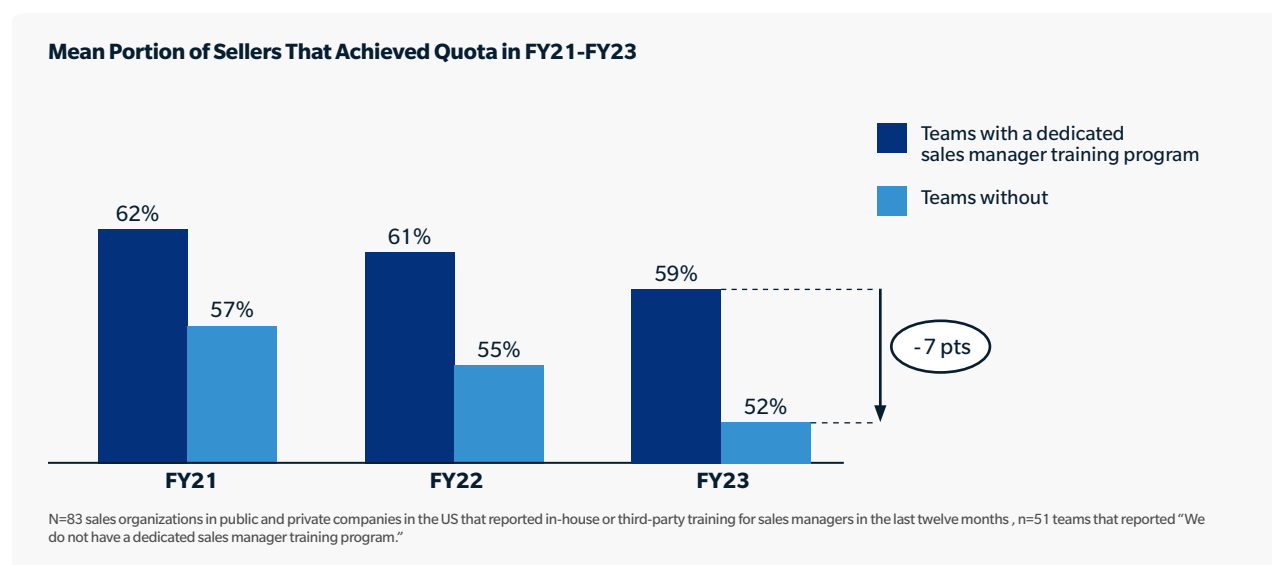
N=83 sales organizations with dedicated sales manager training programs

Ineffective sales managers create ripple effects, hindering the entire commercial organization. Despite their critical role, training for this group is frequently deprioritized. However, when firms do invest in equipping their frontline managers with the necessary skills, it directly correlates with improved commercial outcomes.

Dedicated sales manager training programs produce more effective frontline managers and more productive sellers.

To understand how frontline manager training impacts the sales organization, we used two bellwether metrics: seller quota attainment and a rating of sales manager effectiveness (as reported by their enablement leaders). We chose quota attainment as a quantitative measure most closely aligned to seller productivity, and the effectiveness rating as a qualitative measure of the sales management team's ability to manage seller performance. When we compared attainment scores and effectiveness ratings for commercial teams with and without dedicated sales manager training programs, the results were clear – **companies that invest in frontline training (1) consistently see more of their sellers achieve quota and (2) rate their managers as more effective at managing sales performance.**

Sales teams with dedicated sales manager training programs consistently outperformed those without them across all three of the most recent fiscal years leading up to our study. In FY2023, the difference was a staggering seven percentage points.

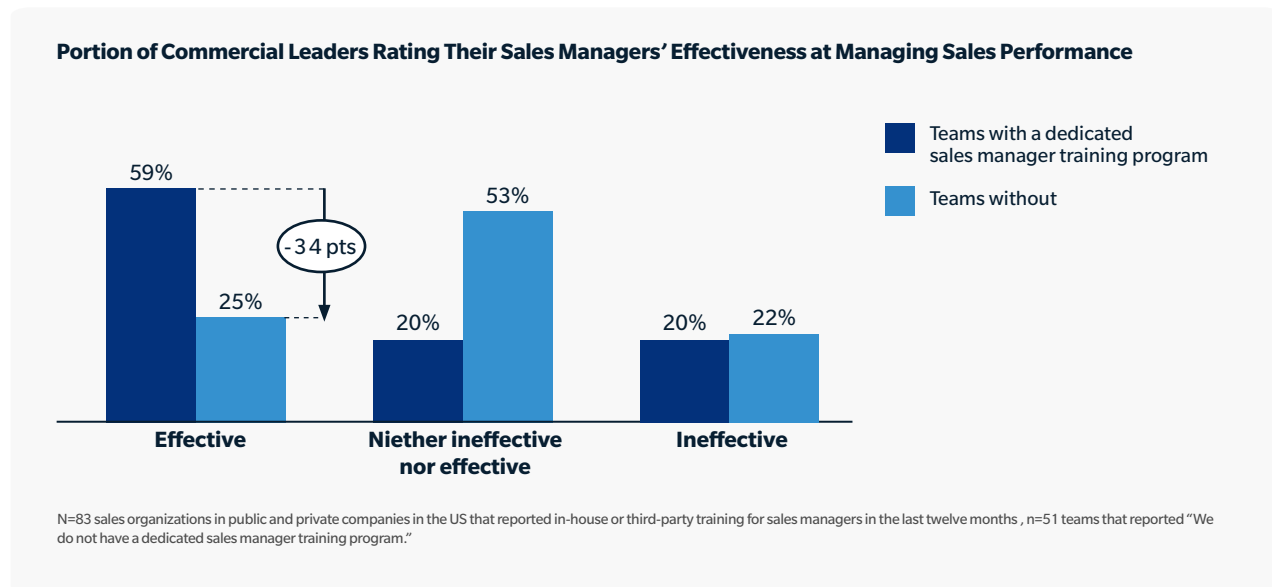


For perspective (and simple math), consider the effect of a 7-point increase in quota attainment on a fictional sales team with 100 sellers who all have the same annual target of \$1M. In this scenario, 7% of sellers carry 7% of a \$100M annual quota, which equates to a \$7M increase in revenue when sales managers receive training.



Now consider the costs of gaining that performance. For 100 sellers, we typically see about 12 sales managers. The cost of periodic training for a group of 12 managers varies, but it is surely south of \$7M per year. Apply that same math to a \$1B firm with 120 sales managers producing an extra \$70M per year, and it seems obvious that the amplifying effect of sales manager training on seller productivity easily justifies the investment.

Still, an increase in quota attainment could be a result of several factors. To credit frontline managers, the increase in seller productivity should be accompanied by an increase in sales manager effectiveness. Given that enablement leaders are often measured against the same quota attainment figures as sales managers, it is likely that their assessment of effectiveness is tightly correlated with attainment. And that's exactly what we found.



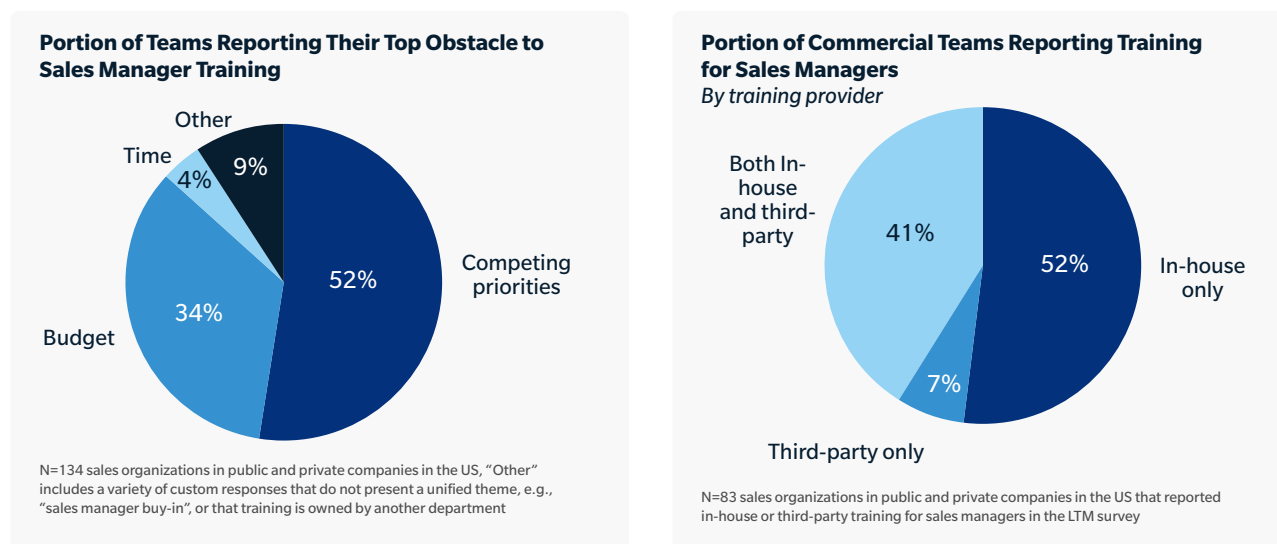
When asked about the performance of their sales managers, about 60% of enablement leaders in organizations that invest in dedicated programs for the frontline rated their managers as "effective". Compare that to just a quarter (25%) of teams without dedicated programs. The striking difference (roughly 34 percentage points) is a strong indicator that purposeful upskilling for sales managers has a noticeable effect on their performance.

So if manager training has such clear benefits, why the deficit, and how do we ensure that the training captures those benefits? We turn to that next.

Stop allowing short-term priorities to serve as obstacles to training sales managers.

Both data and conventional wisdom suggest that investing in a dedicated sales manager training program is a no-regret move. Most of the companies in our study have programs dedicated to sales manager training, though as previously stated, most of them are still failing to actually get the job done regularly for all managers on the team. So what's stopping enablement teams from training the frontline more frequently?

When asked about their top obstacle to sales manager training, enablement leaders most often report competing priorities as the leading blocker (52%). Enablement teams often prioritize seller training or other enablement initiatives over sales manager training. Only a third of enablement leaders report lack of budget for manager training (34%) and just a small fraction cite lack of time (4%). This implies that most teams earmark budget to develop sales managers and a strong majority have the time to accomplish the task, but more often than not enablement leaders overlook the frontline managers.



Given that training is the most prevalent functional responsibility for enablement teams, it's surprising that enablement leaders report such low training completion rates for sales managers. It may be that most training resources (and enablement's attention) are reserved for sellers. Indeed, we found a slim majority of teams (51%) had trained all sellers in their organizations in the preceding year. That's a better outcome than most sales managers enjoy, but hardly a reason to believe enablement teams are too laser-focused on seller training.

It's possible that enablement leaders struggle to produce content for sales managers or deliver manager training in-house. About half of the teams in our study (48%) that reported dedicated programs for frontline managers used both in-house and third-party resources to deliver training. It's worth noting that we found no statistical difference in quota attainment outcomes or effectiveness based on the training provider - in-house, third-party, or a mix of both - nor did we find any difference in the frequency with which companies in either group train their managers. It seems that simply getting the training completed matters most for outcomes, but companies are doing no better training their managers more frequently regardless of who delivers the training.

Most likely the reason sales manager training is neglected in many firms is simpler (and more inherently human) than actual time constraints or differences in training modality – **enablement leaders and the frontline managers themselves are allowing short-term priorities to eclipse their long-term professional growth.** The perception is that sales managers cannot afford the time away from what in the moment seems like a paramount concern, e.g., a new product launch, a leadership change (new CROs are a bit too common) or the perennial excuse "it's the end of month (or the quarter, or the year) and we need our sales managers focused on a strong close."

This mentality is understandable. However these barriers to training are essentially self-imposed and ultimately counterproductive. Given the demands on most sales managers, there will always be a reason to delay training them. The most productive commercial teams remove these artificial barriers and prioritize time for sales manager development. And they structure their trainings somewhat differently, which we turn to next.

Treat managing sales performance and sales coaching as distinct and address both for effective manager training.

Of course it's not enough to simply prioritize training. To successfully increase seller productivity, sales managers must focus on the right skills to master their craft. While we often see sales managers attend training with their teams, sales management training should not be confused with sales training for sellers. The competencies required to be a great manager are not the same as those required to be a great seller. This is one reason top sellers don't always make good managers. Sales managers should attend seller training sessions to reinforce positive behaviors (and refresh their own knowledge), but this should be in addition to training on the fundamentals of managing a sales team.

Commercial teams need to look beyond selling skills and instead prioritize guidance for sales managers on the skills needed to successfully lead a sales team. For those companies with a dedicated program for sales manager training, we asked enablement leaders about their top priorities. Unsurprisingly, managing sales performance is most often cited among their top three priorities (78% of companies), followed by coaching (72%) and pipeline management (63%). When tailoring training to sales managers, enablement leaders most often focus on making managers better at guiding seller performance and maintaining pipeline health.



Managing sales performance and sales coaching are distinct skills, though it may not be apparent to enablement leaders (or even some sales managers) why both components are needed. **What's the difference between managing performance and coaching?**

Managing sales performance involves setting clear expectations, monitoring progress, and holding sellers accountable for achieving targets and adhering to processes. This includes establishing goals, tracking key performance indicators (KPIs), and providing regular feedback on sales activities and results. Sales coaching focuses on developing individual sellers' skills and providing deal coaching to improve opportunity win rates. This includes observing customer interactions, providing constructive feedback, and helping sellers identify areas for improvement. Strong performance management ensures sellers understand their goals and practice the right behaviors to meet them, while effective sales coaching fosters a culture of continuous learning and development. While distinct, these skills are intertwined, and sales managers need both to successfully lead their teams.

Managing Sales Performance

Implementing behavior-based systems to manage key sales activities and establishing clear performance expectations to drive results.

Examples of Managing Sales Performance:

- 1 Setting expectations and holding sellers accountable for opportunity targets
- 2 Monitoring and assessing sales performance metrics
- 3 Conducting regular performance reviews and providing constructive feedback
- 4 Identifying and addressing performance gaps through targeted interventions
- 5 Creating and implementing performance improvement plans



Sales Coaching

Helping teams to enhance performance through structured coaching processes and techniques.

Examples of Sales Coaching:

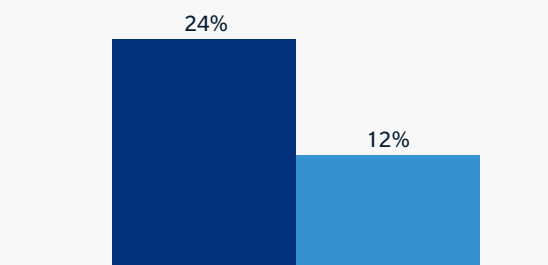
- 1 Guiding sellers to manage the opportunity process more effectively
- 2 Developing sellers' skills in sales conversations, presentations, and negotiations
- 3 Providing individualized feedback and deal coaching to improve win rates
- 4 Helping sellers build stronger relationships with customers and key stakeholders
- 5 Mentoring and supporting sellers in their professional development and growth

Devote time to technology training to ensure productivity gains from new technologies are fully captured.

The mechanics of managing sellers and sales coaching are now firmly linked with technology. Sales managers rely on CRM and other tools to monitor KPIs and keep them informed on pipeline health. But while revenue technology is now indispensable to the sales manager's success, revenue technology training (i.e., adopting and utilizing sales technology tools to enhance productivity and drive revenue growth) was the least prioritized focus area for sales managers. Just 12% of teams with a dedicated sales manager training program report it among their top three concerns. Interestingly, though, our study found that top-performing enablement teams are twice as likely (24%) to cite revenue technology training as a top priority.

Portion of Teams Reporting Revenue Technology Training in Their Top Three Sales Manager Training Priorities

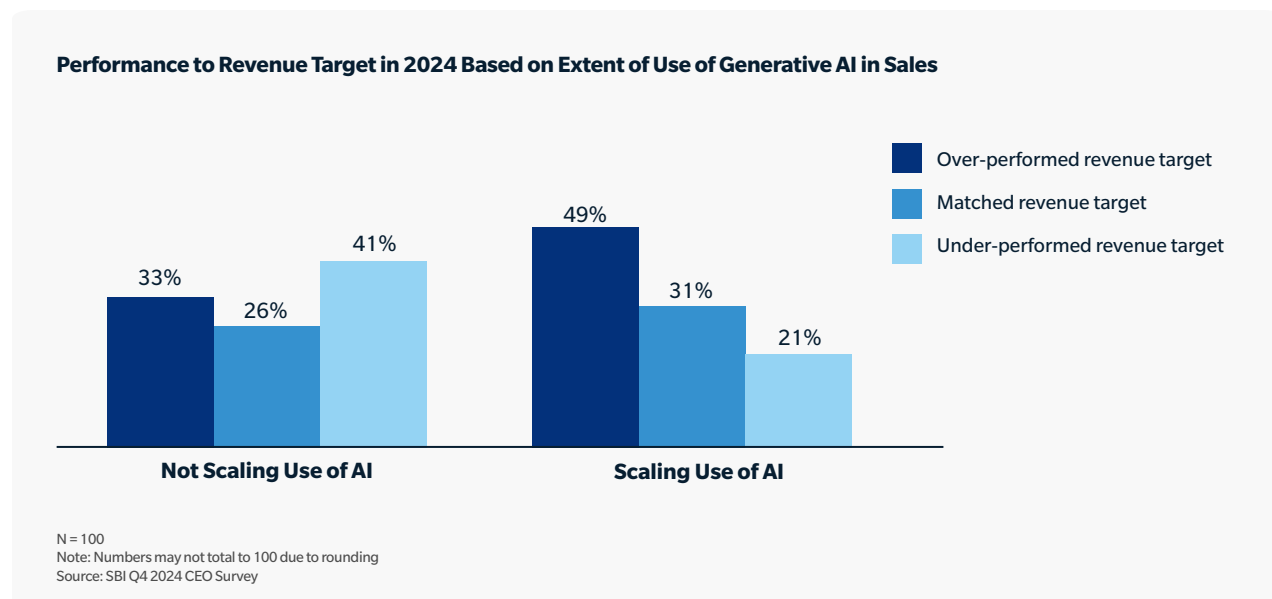
- Top-performing enablement teams
- All teams with sales manager training programs



N=83 sales organizations with dedicated sales manager training programs in public and private companies in the US, n=25 top-performing enablement teams with 17% higher attainment. See [How Modern Enablement Teams Scale for Growth](#) for details on top-performing team criteria.

The relative increase in focus from elite enablement teams is small, but likely a telling reaction to broader trends. The sales manager's role in leveraging technology has advanced beyond nagging sellers to update CRM. Frontline leaders are often expected to lead the adoption of new sales technologies. They need to be capable enough with revenue tools to stay informed on team performance and help sellers with functionality to avoid bottlenecks in internal processes. Moreover, managers should be using AI and tools like Gong or Chorus.ai to act as a force multiplier, allowing them to virtually be on every call and provide feedback to sellers after any customer meeting.

The productivity gains from emerging sales tools and AI platforms should not be ignored. When asked about performance to revenue targets in 2024, roughly half (49%) of CEOs in organizations that have scaled the use of AI in sales reported over-performing compared to just a third of CEOs in organizations not scaling the use of AI.



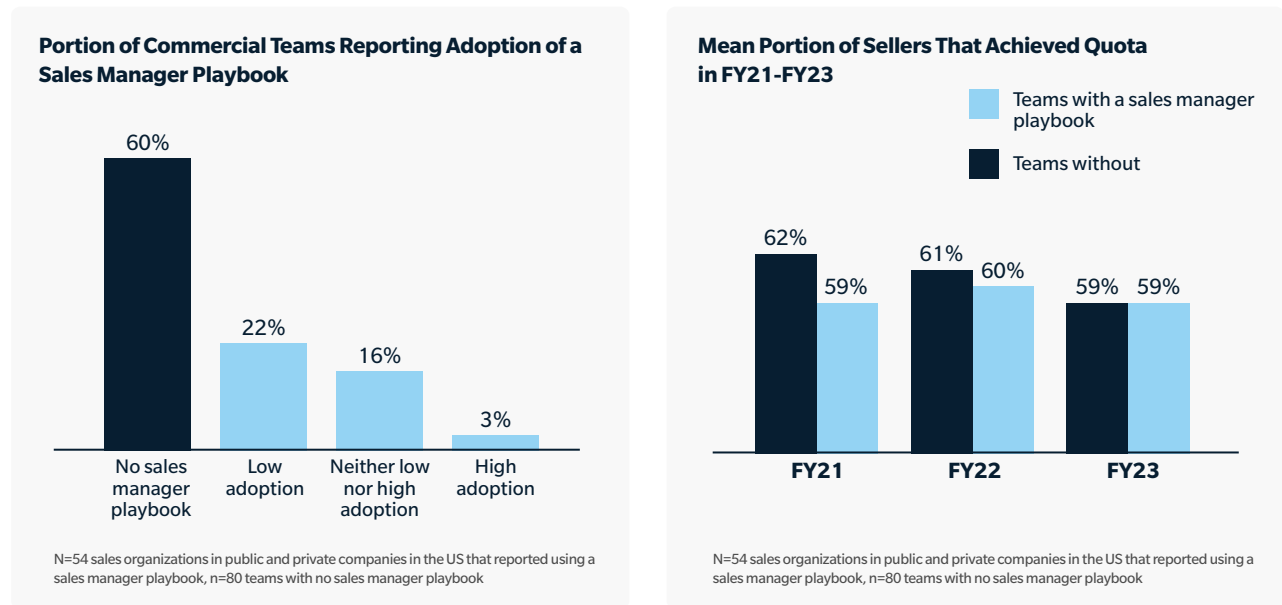
As AI use continues to increase and new tools and workflows emerge in the sales stack, sales managers will need direction on how to best leverage new technologies themselves and instruct their teams. In addition to training on the traditional fundamentals of sales management, enablement teams must ensure that future training programs for the frontline include guidance on effectively using generative-AI and a modern sales tech stack to increase seller efficiency.

Don't rely on coaching playbooks as the sole reinforcement mechanism.

Like any learning endeavor, sales manager training is a process, not a one-time event. Enablement leaders who take a programmatic approach to developing frontline managers see better outcomes in both manager skill and revenue performance. Reinforcement is key. To successfully shape manager behavior, enablement teams must ensure they consistently fortify training concepts with materials that are readily accessible and actually deepen sales managers' knowledge.

Enablement teams commonly use playbooks to standardize and reinforce behaviors across the commercial organization. Many teams (about 40% of the companies in our study) chose to codify competencies and processes for frontline managers in a bespoke sales manager playbook. This is fine in theory, though we find that when applying a standard approach the value may be limited.

Just 3% of the teams in our study reported high adoption of their sales manager playbook, compared to 22% that reported low adoption for sales managers. It seems that most teams that create playbooks rarely see sales managers using them. And what’s worse, in those organizations where managers do use playbooks, there may be a negative correlation with quota attainment, in some cases coinciding with a smaller portion of sellers achieving quota.



To be fair, creating a sales manager playbook is likely not itself causing most teams that use them to decline in productivity. The exercise alone of creating good processes and documenting competencies for sales managers to include in a playbook is certainly valuable for most organizations. The danger lies in over-reliance on a playbook to change sales manager behavior. The traditional sales manager playbook, even in digital form (e.g., PDF), is static, limited in scope, and often only useful as a reference to find other useful resources (e.g., job aids and sales tools).

While a playbook can be helpful, companies gain even greater value from enablement content for sales managers and increase the effectiveness of skills development by adhering to **these critical principles for learning reinforcement**:

1. Build momentum for change by ensuring new processes and playbooks are accompanied by robust training prior to implementation.
2. Bolster learning with post-training “refresher” sessions using new tools and processes in real-life scenarios to create lasting behavioral changes.
3. Engage sales managers with a variety of training formats to increase knowledge retention, including instructor-led training (in-person or virtual) and opportunities for learning-by-doing, e.g., role play and group activities.
4. Leverage tools and job aids to solidify and reinvigorate concepts post-training.
5. Embed training content in CRM and other tools in the sales tech stack to make critical information more accessible within the workflows of sales managers.

The role of the frontline sales manager is undoubtedly more complex today than it has ever been, and expectations are unlikely to abate. The underlying challenges posed by increased buyer friction and the pace of sales technology innovation are poised to accelerate. While many organizations fail to invest in developing frontline managers, those that do produce more effective leaders and realize outsized returns in seller performance. To amplify seller productivity, the best enablement teams will overcome barriers to sales manager training and implement skill-based programs that maximize the value of the frontline.

Next Steps for Enablement Leaders

1. **Access additional SBI research** on skills-based training for sales managers. [🔗](#)
2. **View available sales training resources** for enablement leaders. [🔗](#)
3. **Talk to an SBI subject-matter expert** about best practices for implementing a frontline sales manager program. [🔗](#)

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