



Why CEOs and Boards Should Prioritize Investing in their Senior Sales Leaders

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Picture this: Your Chief Sales Officer is excelling at commercial strategy and deal-making and is consistently overdelivering on top-line sales targets. Sounds ideal, right?

Yet, the reality is not quite as simple. *“The pressure has reached a new level. It is getting more difficult to maintain my team’s motivation levels. Stretch targets and bonuses are no longer enough. I now need to*

play the full leadership piano,” said one Sales leader.

Senior Sales leaders and their teams have been grappling with a near-constant flow of external unprecedented disruptions, changing customer and consumer behavior, inflation-driven pricing negotiations, fragile product availability, talent shortages, and accelerated digitization—a development

felt particularly strongly since the pandemic.

In recent conversations with Egon Zehnder, several Commercial leaders, including Chief Sales/ Commercial / Growth Officers, Head of Sales, GMs, MDs – told us they acknowledge the imperative of becoming *whole* leaders, evolving from managing sales to *leading* a high-performance “Sales 2.0” team.

As we explore in this article, these leaders are traversing uncharted territory and **recognize the need for additional support, particularly in the form of developmental opportunities for themselves, encouraged and provided by their CEOs and boards**—which will enable them to grow and transform themselves, their teams, the function, and the wider organization.

The Sales Leader's Development Journey

Professional development and inner work have become indispensable to lead in today's unstable environment. Senior Sales leaders know their role goes beyond commercial responsibilities. Being successful now also hinges on nimble leadership, creative problem-solving, digital fluency, and, above all, robust *people skills*. The following testimonials encapsulate the overall sentiments from Sales leaders:

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The pressure has reached a new level. It is getting more difficult to maintain my team's motivation levels. Stretch targets and bonuses are no longer enough.

“

I constantly wonder how to best support my team members. After intense years of near-constant negotiation, this part of the role that many have enjoyed for years has turned into something that is energy draining.

“

A new generation of leaders is arising. There is more focus on flexibility, empowerment, and agility instead of top-down management.

Not only is the Sales function overall changing, but so are the scope and expectations upon the Commercial leader. This identity shift has translated into leaders becoming “Chief Energy, Relationship, and Outcome Officers.” This is particularly evident in their adjustment of leadership styles to effectively lead teams, entailing more compassion, more listening and less directing. They have dedicated time to reflection and self-improvement—a major departure from the stereotypical commercial executive, now a profile of the past.

This development is driven by the fact that senior Sales leaders are continuously reminding themselves of their responsibility as *people* leaders. Their priorities are now retaining talent and exploring alternative methods to keep teams engaged and motivated, particularly as financial incentives have become less abundant given overall pressure on the bottom line. For example, Chief Sales Officers are centering their leadership style on the purpose of the company, work-life balance, and showing up as a fully present, supportive line manager. This shift reflects a broader acknowledgment of the changing workforce dynamics and the imperative to embrace a new leadership identity through development.

The Sales Team's Journey

Sales teams have faced an interesting paradox. The role has gotten much more diverse, and with the rapid escalation of responsibilities, some team members have expressed fear and anxiety about their readiness to adapt and shift their identity—especially those who have been around for longer.

“

We need moments for the team to create trust among one another and with leadership; it does take time.

“

With consumer behavior changing, we need our own internal change processes—thinking about upskilling, reskilling, and adapting.

“

Some team members have anxiety because they don't feel or are not up to the new scope. Roles have become more challenging.

For a few, this uncertainty, combined with growing pressure to deliver through turbulent times, has led to contemplation of taking a career break or even exploring alternative roles. Yet, amid these uncertainties, there were those who found solace in their visible self-efficacy and the joy derived from playing an even more pivotal role in driving the organization's success.

At the forefront of this new reality, senior Sales leaders have explored avenues for reinvention and team motivation. They are preparing their teams for the increasing international scope of work and the need for a broader set of skills beyond traditional sales and negotiation tasks—looking at the wider demand side of the business in all its complexity, getting increasingly involved on topics from procurement, to digitalization, to supply chain, and more.

As teams undergo this journey, having a capable leader at the top is critical to ensure the organization's resilience in the long run.

The CEO and the Board's Journey

We have found that many CEOs and board members have started to deepen their relationship with senior Sales leaders, getting much closer to their work.



I never before saw this level of interest in what we are discussing with our customers.



Those who have never been in Sales are now trying to understand what Sales means, what customers want and need.



My line managers do not detach from me. They visit my market more often than in the past.

Conversely, other Sales leaders sensed some of their executive and non-executive board members were too far away from actual discussions in market or had never been in comparable roles themselves—thus expecting the same outcome despite changed circumstances. Sales leaders made clear that aligning with senior stakeholders is key for “taking the right decisions and sticking them out” and for ensuring consistent signals are being sent to their teams, reassuring them of the unwavering support by the company for their negotiation journeys.

Now, a logical next step for the CEO and the board is to formalize development pathways for senior Sales leaders. This proactive approach secures the company's future by accomplishing several objectives:

nurturing the development of current leaders to their own benefit and the benefit of their teams; and identifying emerging talents, thus cultivating a robust pipeline of capable individuals poised to lead the company.

This is where leveraging tools such as Egon Zehnder's **Potential Model** become competitive game-changers. Our model provides insights on individuals across four dimensions: Curiosity, Insight, Engagement, and Determination. By evaluating these leadership traits, organizations create the optimal conditions for each leader to achieve his or her full potential, while tapping their drivers of energy to maintain high levels of motivation even during challenging periods.

Beyond assessing for potential, best-in-class organizations regularly assess the fit of their leaders with the company's culture and provide **tailored development journeys** to develop both their individual leaders and their leadership teams or even their wider organizations.

When leaders have a deep level of awareness of their companies' tenets and core values, they are more well-positioned for success. Even more importantly, a clear view of the capabilities and potential of both the Sales team and its leader equips the company with invaluable insights for future leadership needs, Chief Sales Officer succession and broader CEO successions, among other critical milestones.

Our Take: Chief Sales Officers have been driving incremental growth to the organization with dedication and determination. Now it's time for CEOs and Boards to apply that same level of rigor to the development of their Sales executives.

The idea of transforming oneself to transform the organization is a well-documented sentiment that our Egon Zehnder peers have **written about**. Sales leaders share the sentiment that transforming themselves, honing their identity and nurturing teams is key in steering the organizations and is the pathway that will bring positive outcomes. To reinvent and continuously upskill the Sales function with the ability to tackle both today's and emerging challenges, Sales leaders will need to start within themselves. And the CEO and board can be of great support on that journey.

Elevating Your Sales Leadership:

Investing in Chief Sales Officers

Sales Leaders have been instrumental in driving incremental growth within organizations.

CEOs and Boards need to prioritize the development of Sales executives with the same rigor.



Changing Leadership Dynamics

Sales leaders are redefining their roles to focus on the company's purpose, work-life balance, and supportive management.

This shift acknowledges changing workforce dynamics and emphasizes the need for new leadership identities.



Impact on Team Dynamics

The entire team feels the pressures of recent challenges, emphasizing the importance of supportive leadership.



Challenges Faced by Sales Leaders

Sales leaders and teams contend with numerous external disruptions: shifting customer behaviors, inflation-driven pricing negotiations, talent shortages, and accelerated digitization.

The role of the Commercial leader is evolving, requiring adaptability in leadership styles towards more compassionate, reflective, and supportive approaches.



Formalizing Development Pathways

CEOs and Boards should formalize development pathways for senior Sales leaders to secure the company's future.

This approach nurtures current leaders, identifies emerging talents, and cultivates a robust leadership pipeline.



Benefits of Development Initiatives

Deep awareness of company tenets and values positions leaders for success.

Understanding Sales team capabilities and potential provides insights for future leadership needs, including CSO and CEO successions.

Conclusion:

Investing in the development of Chief Sales Officers is crucial for organizational success, fostering leadership excellence and ensuring preparedness for future challenges.

About Egon Zehnder

Egon Zehnder is the world's preeminent leadership advisory firm, inspiring leaders to navigate complex questions with human answers. We help organizations get to the heart of their leadership challenges and offer honest feedback and insights to help leaders realize their true being and purpose.

We are built on a foundation that supports partnership in the truest sense of the word and aligns our interests with the interests of our clients. Our 600+ consultants across 64 offices and 36 countries are former industry and functional leaders who collaborate seamlessly across geographies, industries and functions to deliver the full power of the Firm to every client, every time.

We partner closely with public and private corporations, family-owned enterprises, and non-profit and government agencies to provide executive search, leadership solutions, CEO search and succession, board advisory, and diversity, equity & inclusion.

Our services include discovering leaders, developing leadership, advancing governance, shaping successions, and unlocking transformations. We partner with Mobius Executive Leadership to offer highly experiential, personalized and transformational programs for senior leaders.

We believe that together we can transform people, organizations and the world through leadership.

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