Moving the Middle

A step-by-step coaching guide

Your greatest growth lever is your middle 70%. Coach them up, and watch your revenues climb.

AMBITION

Introduction

There's no doubt about it: effective and consistent sales coaching is the #1 thing you can do to drive performance and productivity on your team — and to create a culture of winning on your sales floor.

The most successful coaching programs are driven by data. But even if you've got the right program in place, there's an important lever you might not be pulling. Too many sales leaders focus their coaching efforts primarily on their teams' top and bottom performers — i.e., only 30% of their sales team.

That leaves out a whole lot of (solid!) reps, with a whole lot of (revenue!) potential.

So: this guide is all about why — and how — moving the middle can move the needle for your sales org in a very powerful way. You'll find actionable, easy-to-implement tools and processes throughout, so you can get started today.

Here we go!

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Part 1.

The Middle Matters

Distribution On The Bell Curve

D Players
Probably shouldn't
be here

B-C Players
The Middle

A Players
The top performers

Think of your sales organization as points on a performance bell curve.

At the top, **you've got your A players**. These are the reps that are consistently exceeding quota, closing gargantuan logo deals, and piling up the Closed Won accounts left and right. They are the superstars of your team, and they represent the top 10%. Chances are, you spend time with these folks because they just get it. It's fun to work with winners, and their passion for selling is infectious.

On the flip side, **you have your D players**. They represent the bottom 20% of your team, and as long as we're being honest, there's a chance you should've let at least a few of them go when they missed quota for the first time months ago. They aren't keeping up with the numbers, they're frustrated, or they just don't care. Either way, we see a lot of sales managers spending time with the bottom 20% because it feels heroic — I might be able to save this rep's job if I can just get their numbers up!

Which means sales leaders spend the majority of their time between these two groups, leaving the middle 70% of your sales organization unattended.

This approach has two big problems:

1. At the top end, you've got limited opportunity for impact: your A players already are operating at high performance levels — which means you'll see diminishing returns pretty quickly.

2. At the bottom end, even if you see a big lift, it's a relatively small number of players. And it could take Herculean efforts to make a real change; the reality is that these people just may not be cut out for this kind of work.

But if you were to spread your coaching focus across your entire organization — i.e., spend less time with the bottom and top performers, and more time in the middle — then for a similar amount of time and energy, your coaching initiatives could have a much more powerful effect on revenues.

Need proof? Let's do the math.

Say you have a team of 20 reps that follow the 10 / 70 / 20 distribution: 2 A players, 14 in the middle, and 4 D players. Each has an annual quota of $500,000.

- Your 10 A players are putting in 110% of quota at $550,000 each.
- Your 70 B and C players are at 75% of quota, with $375,000 each.
- And your bottom 20 players are hitting 50% of quota at $250,000 each.

Instead of spending an inordinate amount of time trying to squeeze a little more out of your top performers, and trying to pull your below-average folks up to average: see what happens when you coach your entire organization and get a small but meaningful 5% lift out of each player.

Coaching the Middle: Impact

Players	% of Quota	Output	5% Lift	Net Increase by Group
All-star 1	110%	$550,000	577,500	
All-star 2	110%	$550,000	577,500	$55,000
Middle 1	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 2	75%	$375,000	393,750	$262,500
Middle 3	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 4	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 5	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 6	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 7	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 8	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 9	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 10	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 11	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 12	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 13	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Middle 14	75%	$375,000	393,750	
Low 1	50%	$250,000	262,500	
Low 2	50%	$250,000	262,500	$50,000
Low 3	50%	$250,000	262,500	
Low 4	50%	$250,000	262,500	

Quota = $500,000

When you consider the net change for each group, there's no question about it: The magic happens in the middle. All together, your A players generated $55,000 more, and your D players generated $50,000 more. But your B and C players blew those numbers out of the water, generating $262,500 more.

So if you're not focused on the middle 70%, it's time to see how far effective coaching can take your B and C players — and what impact that movement has on revenue. Read on for the tools, benchmarks, and processes you can leverage to guide your coaching program.

Part 2.

The Tools:
How do I move the middle?

Productivity Tools
- Measurable
- Levers for action

Feedback Loops

Feedback Loops

Benchmarks
- Accountability
- Clarity

Process
- Repeatable
- Segmented

Feedback Loops
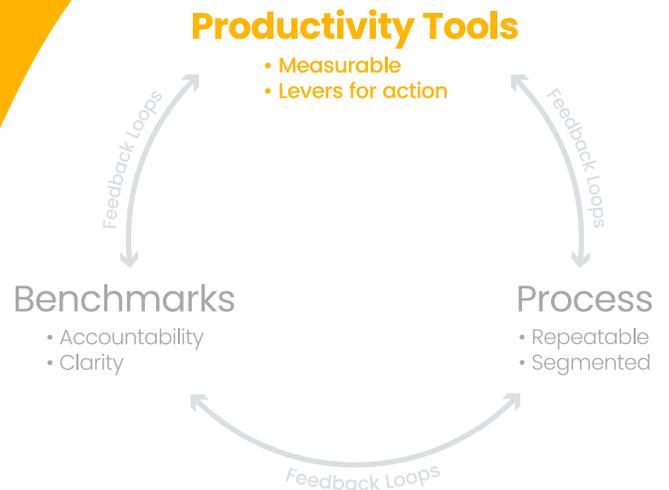
Coaching up your middle 70% is all about maximizing productivity. As you set out to identify and pull your productivity levers, bear in mind:

- Always work in tandem with clear baseline metric targets (*Benchmarks, Part 3*) and a repeatable sales workflow or process (*Process, Part 4*).

- Productivity initiatives should always be aligned to the goals and objectives of the organization or team.

Here are the three tools that every sales leader should have in their toolkit to increase productivity among the average performers on their team.

Your Productivity Toolkit

1. Structured programs

Great sales coaching combines — at scale — the practice of frequent 1:1 coaching programs that focus on personal development, individual and team goals, and recurring feedback that pinpoints explicit areas of improvement.

Just say no to:

- **Annual reviews:** Only talking goals and performance once or twice year will get you (and your team) nowhere, fast.

- **Water-cooler coaching:** Sessions shouldn't be scary or overly formal — but they should be…well, sessions. This is too important to happen on the fly.

- **Data silos:** Managers and leaders shouldn't be the only ones who can see coaching data.

Always:

- **Be consistent:** Programs should be in the same format and scheduled on a frequent, recurring basis to ensure continuous development.

- **Use data:** Line up coaching sessions with performance helps both managers and reps see the value in your programs — and know where the programs need tweaking.

- **Be prepared:** Send questions before your meeting, and review your reps' answers — which can provide critical context. Remember: there should never be any surprises at the start of the session.

- **Set (and record) action items:** Visible action items hold managers and reps accountable. Even better, do it together for maximum rep buy-in.

2. Teamwide visibility

Transparency between managers and individual reps is incredibly important. But if you want to see real results, take it a step farther and increase visibility across your entire team.

Make goals (and recognition) public

When you make goals public, reps have an added (healthy!) dose of pressure to make things happen. And when those goals are met, it's incredibly important to make sure your reps are acknowledged in a highly visible way — creating a powerful feedback loop. For maximum impact, get your C-levels involved in recognizing the achievements of your sales team.

Praise in public + **Leverage management**
= **Culture of recognition**

Go beyond leaderboards

Leaderboards drive visibility and energy on the sales floor. Of course, they always work best if you align your leaderboard slides with the metrics, goals, etc. that matter most.

But we're talking about maximizing your middle 70%. That means, by default, many of these people wouldn't show up on a traditional leaderboard. So you have to get creative.

With Ambition, sales leaders can highlight the reps and teams who have significantly improved their performance around key activities — maybe one of your reps set twice as many meetings as last week, or one of your teams increased opportunities created by 112% month-over-month. By focusing on the delta, not the number itself, you set the stage for continual improvement.

Invest in real-time coaching

Savvy sales leaders find ways to automate alerts when reps meet and exceed goals, allowing them to give immediate feedback — whether that's a public shoutout or a private meeting to get more insight into a developing trend. Don't wait until the end of the month — or even your next 1:1 — to recognize your reps for a job well done.

3. Run smarter contests

Again, this takes a little creativity. Just like leaderboards, the last thing you want when running contests is the same rep winning every time. Your top reps should win occasionally, but you have to think outside the box to engage more of your team.

A great way to do this: try team-based contests, which create peer-to-peer accountability that pushes reps to work harder. Team-based contests also incentivize your top reps to help their peers. Encouraging your team members to share best practices, offer a hand on a deal, or work together on call scripts is always a major win.

Now that you've got the right tools to increase productivity, let's take a look at how you measure success — so you know you're using them the right way.

Part 3.

The Benchmarks:
How do I know it's working?

Productivity Tools
• Measurable
• Levers for action

Feedback Loops

Benchmarks
• **Accountability**
• **Clarity**

Process
• Repeatable
• Segmented

Feedback Loops

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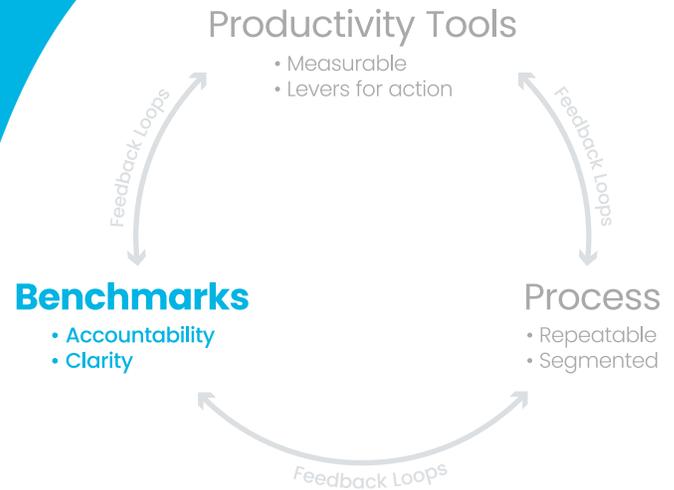
Benchmarks are hard. They require historical data, market awareness, defined sales processes, attention to detail, clear communication, and ongoing management for accountability.

Phew, that's a lot. And to be honest, given the amount of work they take, most sales managers will tell you that benchmarks are really just best guesses.

But benchmarks are critical: they provide visibility so that you and every single person on your team can see exactly how their efforts are paying off. We've said it before and we'll say it again: visibility is foundational for driving motivation on your team. When you're thinking about coaching up your middle 70%, it's one thing you can't ignore.

**So: here are three simple ways to put benchmarks to work.**

1. Provide crystal clarity

This seems like a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised how many sales team leaders aren't taking a step back to ensure their benchmarks are 100% clear to every single person. And many times, it's because the sales managers themselves aren't sure what those benchmarks should be.

Here's how to nail your benchmarks down:

1. Start with your organization's prime directive: what's the big number at the top of the food chain?

2. Now, how does that break down between business units? Between geographic locations?

3. Then break that down to teams. What is each team responsible for driving for the business?

4. Finally, you get to the individual contributors in the form of quota.

Prime Directive
→ Org
→ Group
→ Team
→ Individual
→ **Quota**
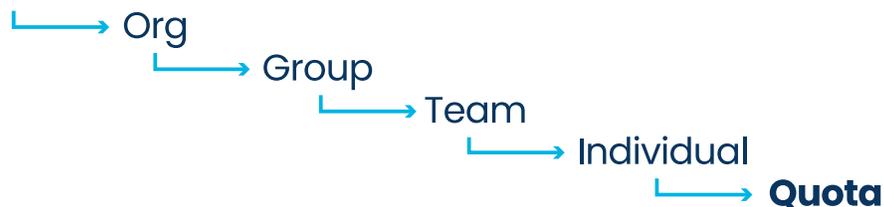
At every step through this chain, it must be a top priority of the business to keep these numbers in front of employees. If you don't have access to these numbers, use this as an opportunity to push your leadership for clarity. *Everyone will benefit.*

2. Follow the A.O.R. framework

As salespeople, we love our acronyms — and this one is incredibly important. For the uninitiated, A.O.R. stands for:

Activities ⟶ Objectives ⟶ Results

Activities	Objectives	Results
Daily or weekly actions reps have agency over	Outcomes that come from effectively performing activities	Ultimate target(s) from successfully compiling objectives

Looking at benchmarks through this lens helps sales teams understand which benchmarks to track so that you can make your prime directive (see #1!) a reality. In other words: how can we reach 100% quota?

It's all about working backwards: start with results, then determine which objectives need to be benchmarked and tracked to achieve those results, and which frequent, consistent actions drive those outcomes.

3. Get specific

One of the most important aspects of the A.O.R. approach is that it won't be the same across your sales organization. Have a different set of activities, objectives, and results for each role in your org: xDRs, AEs or ISRs, field reps, account managers, and even customer success managers. What is each role's part to play in reaching 100% target goal attainment for the org?

Make A.O.R.s clear to your team members across all roles, giving them visibility into what they need to achieve to perform, and how their roles fit in with the rest of the organization.

With new tools under your belt and your benchmarks in place, you're ready to build repeatable, scalable processes that will drive success on your team, over and over again.

Part 4.

The Process:
How do I repeat (and scale) success?

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• Measurable
• Levers for action

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• Accountability
• Clarity

Process
• **Repeatable**
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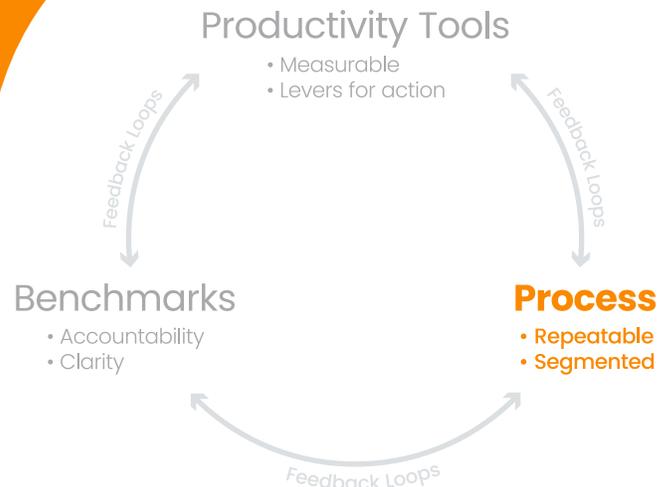
Taking action to set benchmarks and drive productivity has limited impact if you don't find ways to turn those actions into repeatable processes. So now, let's look at how to build process around the productivity and benchmark concepts we introduced in the last section.

Quick Win #1: Focus on consistency

Pop quiz: Do you think Nick Saban shows up every spring and starts coaching his team with a new style, new drills, and different set of expectations?

Hint: The answer is no.

Remember that to actually change behavior in your squad, consistency is key. Process doesn't just *happen*. Before you launch your program, ask yourself these two questions:

- **1. Consistent training practices:** Do all new hires on your team receive the same training and onboarding?

- **2. Culture of accountability:** Do you have a plan for holding team members accountable to guidelines and practices you've put in place? Have you built this into the culture of your sales org?

Hint: Your answer should be yes.

Quick Win #2: Set frequent checkpoints

Too often, we see sales teams that focus solely on the annual number. This number is so large that it's nearly impossible to see the impact that each individual team member has on it while they close deals. Focusing on the annual number also means that when you finally realize you're going to miss it — it's too late.

Smart sales leaders set frequent, fast checkpoints with their teams, breaking the annual number down into achievable individual contributor goals. To reach that annual number, what does each role/team member need to contribute on a weekly, monthly, and quarterly basis? Help your team members see how each activity they complete or deal they close impacts the team goal and the annual number.

Quick Win #3: Build frequent feedback loops

Keeping your finger on the pulse of your annual number is meaningless if you aren't prepared to react to the information you're receiving. If your checkpoints tell you that your team is not on track to reach revenue, what will you change? Ensure that frequent feedback loops are built into your process — both formal and informal.

Quick Win #4: Deliver visibility

Your reps and teams need to see the progress they're making against their individual and annual goals. This goes beyond pulling reports and sharing numbers at a monthly sales team meeting. They should have visual access to their progress and impact at all times, focusing their effort on the key metrics that impact the big numbers.

As a sales leader, you should talk about your team's progress regularly, both celebrating the wins and also being prepared to dive in when you don't make the numbers.

Quick Win #5: Improve and evaluate continuously

The market will change, your sales team will change, and you will change.

Using feedback loops and checkpoints will not only help your team, but will also give you insight into how things are working. Strong leaders take these insights and turn them into process improvements, continuously building stronger and more effective processes that help you drive productivity and performance throughout your sales floor.

It's go time!

Remember: building a great coaching program takes time, trial and tweaking. Even the best, most experienced sales coaches are constantly evolving their structure and style. What matters is that you have a solid foundation in place and that you're not limiting your coaching investment to only a small part of your team.

If you can move the middle, you can move the needle — and achieve a level of ROI that you never thought possible.

Ready to build a better sales coaching program? Contact sales@ambition.com to demo our coaching platform.

About Ambition

The #1 sales performance software, Ambition transforms sales teams into revenue engines. From coaching and analytics to TVs and contests, our features make it easy for sales leaders to draw smart insights from data, and to create a culture of success on the sales floor — so that every rep can drive revenue in a powerful, measurable way.