

# Hiring Managers vs Promoting Your Best Producers



The first time Maya needed a sales manager, she promoted her top producer. It was the obvious choice for everyone except the producer, who left within four months because the work he was now doing wasn't the work he'd been good at. She also lost his book of business and the second-tier agent who'd been quietly competing with him for the next promotion. Two people gone, no manager, and a quarter of slowed bookings to show for it.

This is the playbook she built for the next time, the test she runs before promoting anyone, and the one signal that tells her an external hire is the right call.

# The Two Failures That Look Identical



Promoting wrong and hiring wrong both produce the same observable outcome: a manager seat that turns over within a year and a team that lost momentum. From the outside they're indistinguishable. From the inside they're two completely different problems.

The promoted-wrong failure is usually a person who was great at the previous job and isn't built for the new one. The hired-wrong failure is usually a person who has the title but doesn't have the operational context to be effective at this specific company.

The mistake Maya made the first time was treating the choice like a binary, promote or hire, when the actual choice is between two different theories of what the manager role is.

# The Question to Ask First



The decision starts with one question: is this manager seat about teaching the team to do something new, or about scaling something the team already does well?

If teaching something new, a new sales motion, a new product line, a new operating cadence, you're hiring the experience that exists outside your team. The right move is an external hire who's done this before.

If scaling something the team already does well, making peer coaching reliable, removing the bottleneck of one person owning all the playbook calls, freeing the founder from being the one signing off on every quote, you're promoting from inside. The right move is the senior agent who already has the team's trust.

The mistake Maya made was promoting for the first scenario. The team needed a manager who could teach it the corporate-pricing motion (which nobody on the team had done before). She promoted the best leisure producer, who had no corporate background, into a role that required corporate experience to succeed.

# When to Promote (And When the Signal Is There)



The signal that an internal candidate is ready isn't their numbers. Top producers can be terrible managers. The signal is whether they're already doing manager work informally, answering peer questions, sitting in on others' difficult calls, mentoring without being asked.

Maya's second attempt at a sales manager came from this signal. The candidate wasn't her top producer. She was the third-highest. But two of the agency's other agents had quietly told Maya in skip-levels that they kept asking this person for help with their pipelines. The candidate was already running a manager motion without the title.

When the team is already turning to someone for advice, formalizing it costs the team almost nothing. When the team isn't turning to that person, formalizing it is asking the team to start from scratch on trust.

# When to Hire External



External hires are right when the agency needs a capability it doesn't have. Corporate sales experience. Multi-channel pricing experience. Running a sales floor of 25+ that's been done before, not invented from scratch.

The risk of an external hire is integration. They arrive with their previous company's playbook and try to install it. The first thirty days are spent learning where this agency's actual constraints live. The first ninety days are spent earning the team's trust without having shared history with anyone.

Maya's tells for an external hire: she stops the conversation if the candidate uses "we" referring to the previous company in the first 20 minutes of the interview. The candidate she eventually hired for the corporate-arm role spent the entire first interview asking her questions about the agency before offering an opinion about anything. That was the signal of a hire who would actually fit.

# The Hybrid That Actually Works



The middle path Maya stumbled into the second time: promote from inside and hire external, in adjacent roles. The promoted senior agent took the manager role for the existing leisure team, scaling something the team already knew. The external hire came in as a peer-level lead for the new corporate motion, bringing experience the team didn't have.

Neither was asked to do the other one's job. The hybrid worked because each person's responsibility was matched to their actual strength.

If you've only got budget for one role, the question goes back to first principles: is the bigger pain the unknown new motion or the unscaled existing one? Pick the role that addresses the bigger pain. Address the smaller one in the next hire.

# The 90-Day Test



Both promoted and hired managers get the same 90-day test. Three things should be visible by day 90.

First, at least one specific tactic the manager has changed about how the team works that the team has visibly adopted. Not a meeting cadence. A specific change in how deals get worked, qualified, or closed.

Second, at least one team member who's measurably improved on a metric that was stuck. The new manager's job is to move the floor; if no one moves in 90 days, something's off.

Third, the manager has built a relationship with the founder where they bring forward bad news without being asked. A manager who only reports good news at the 90-day mark is a manager who hasn't yet earned the team's trust either, because the team hasn't told them what's actually going wrong.

## What to Do When the Promotion Goes Wrong



If the promotion isn't working at the 90-day mark, the conversation Maya now has is the one she didn't have the first time. It's a 30-minute one-on-one with a single question: are you happier in this role than you were six months ago?

Most of the time, the honest answer from a wrongly-promoted top producer is no. The agency loses face by reversing a promotion publicly, but the alternative, letting the wrong person grind through a year of misery and watching them eventually quit, is much worse.

The reversal Maya uses now: rename the role as "lead producer," recompensate at the manager level for two quarters, and run a separate manager search openly. The promoted producer either takes the new role and stays as a top performer, or leaves cleanly. Either is better than slow-motion failure.

## The Cost of Getting It Wrong Twice



The first wrong promotion cost Maya a top producer, his book, his second-tier rival, and a quarter of bookings. She estimates the all-in cost at about \$400K of revenue and a year of slowed culture-building.

The second time she got it right cost her one month of recruiter fees and a 90-day onboarding investment. The math on getting hiring decisions right at 25 agents is much more lopsided than at 5. Fewer hiring decisions, much higher cost per mistake.

The single biggest leverage point for an agency in the 20-50 range is being deliberate about who runs the floor and where the floor is heading. Get the manager hire right and the team scales. Get it wrong twice and the team stalls for a year.