

THE PLAYER/COACH ROLE

Silver Bullet or Purple Squirrel?

2023, Q2



JOHN O'BRIEN
CEO/MANAGING PARTNER

FROM OUR CLIENTS:

"We have tried without success to hire a Player/Coach sales leader. We found they struggled to do both roles effectively."
- Recent quote from a client CEO

FROM OUR CANDIDATES:

"It was the least rewarding role I have had because it was a constant challenge to manage both an individual quota while balancing team leadership responsibilities."
-STG Candidate

Everyone tends to look for the "silver bullet" when it comes to hiring, and a Player/Coach position APPEARS to be just that for many small, high-growth companies. However, the Executive Search Industry knows it better as the "purple squirrel".

Player/Coach positions are typically defined as someone who is responsible for their own individual quota + a rolled-up team quota – and all the responsibilities that go along with that. This can include coaching a team, hiring, creating strategy, managing sales tactics, implementing a new SFA tool, etc. The hope is that one person can do it all.

We advise you to rethink the Player/Coach approach. A silver bullet can still be deadly. Here's why...



1 BALANCING SALES AND COACHING RESPONSIBILITIES IS DIFFICULT

One of the greatest challenges of hiring a player/coach is finding someone who can balance their sales responsibilities with their coaching duties. It takes an experienced individual to be diligent about managing their time in both areas, and if not done well, this can lead the individual to fall short in *both* areas.

2 PLAYING TO STRENGTHS IS BEST - SALES OR LEADERSHIP

We find that most candidates excel best in either a pure sales OR a pure leadership role, NOT both. Your top salesperson is typically not your best sales leader. Skillsets and motivation for both roles are very different. Individuals are most successful when they are able to play to their natural strengths and abilities.

3 IDENTIFYING THE SKILL SET THAT IS "JUST RIGHT" IS CHALLENGING

Hiring Managers will find candidates fall into three categories - Too Junior, Too Senior, and Just Right. Unfortunately, the "Just Right" person is the "purple squirrel".

Sales Talent Group
Executive Search

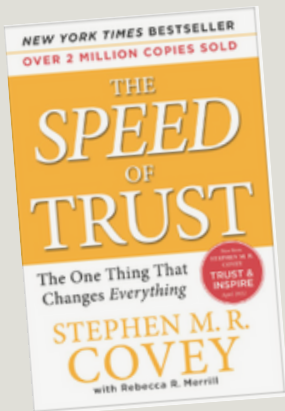
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"Pick this book up! Trust is the foundation of any successful team. A great read for any leader."
-John O'Brien



- **Too Junior** – This is the rock star salesperson or team lead who is ready for the next step. The question is will they be able to hire a team, create a sales structure, and drive strategy with a new go-to-market product in the upcoming year? The hard answer is no. They just don't have enough experience yet.
- **Too Senior** – This person has been a player/coach or a VP of Sales already. Many hiring managers may really like this type of candidate, but ultimately, most A-level candidates will NOT want the job. Been there done that! These individuals want pure leadership roles. They have already proven themselves to be a successful leader so a Player/Coach role will feel like a step back in their career progression.

The Purple Squirrel is typically sourced from the Leadership Team's personal network.



- **Just Right** - the Purple Squirrel. On the rare occasions we see the Player/Coach role work, these candidates are typically sourced from the Leadership team's personal network. These candidates will possess two key ingredients:
 - **Trust:** Trust has already been established between the candidate and the Leadership team based on prior experiences. When times get tough, the Leadership team knows this candidate will shoot straight with them because there is "Relationship Trust". If they also come from a similar market niche, this person will also carry "Market Trust".
 - Reference book: The Speed of Trust, by Steven Covey Jr.
 - **Previous Player/Coach or VP of Sales Experience.** This individual will have a strong leadership background but will still love the challenge of coming into a new environment, selling a new product, and closing their own deals. Because of their relationship with the Leadership Team, they will more easily see the upside of the opportunity and be more willing to accept the risk of making a lateral or perceived "backward" step in their career.

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ACTIONS TO TAKE:

- **Pay Up a Little** for that first hire. It will be worth it. An experienced sales professional with a proven track record that is hungry for a strong upside.
- **Set Clear Expectations** for the first 12-24 months.
 - Commit to that plan and review it together quarterly.
- **Build an On-Boarding Plan** for the first 12 months that is well rounded.



THE ALTERNATIVE

Hire the Best Talent for your CURRENT Need – Growing Revenue!

We see both startups and larger companies that are in high growth mode or launching a new product, seeking these Player/Coach roles. The reality in either situation is that sales revenue is needed to prove concept and fuel growth, so the most important action item is to SELL and provide an environment that enables a sales professional to focus on selling, NOT managing. At the end of the day, I always say “If you don’t sell anything, you will never need a manager...because you will be out of business!”

So, if your budget only allows for one initial hire, our advice is to use that money to hire the best "AA" Sales Professional you can attract.

Ready for Leadership: Hire a "Hands-On" Sales Leader instead of a Player/Coach

When the business is ready, hire an experienced Sales Leader who understands how to hire, grow, and manage a team PLUS is willing to be engaged at each stage of the sales process - supporting, training, and driving each team member to success. Yes, it may cost the business an extra \$200-300k in year one, but the product’s concept has been proven (by the sales pros you hired) and now it’s time to grow.

Overall, the message here is simple – your best long-term strategy is to hire the right person to move your business forward today. High-growth environments can be very fluid, and you may need to adjust and adapt, but we have found hiring one person to fill many roles, is not the best answer for success. Plus, with a typical VP of Sales lasting only 18 months, this “purple squirrel” Player/Coach role has an even higher probability for failure, especially knowing the risks it has attached to it (i.e., new and unproven product offering, PE/VC money looking for quick returns, inexperienced founders with little or no sales experience, etc.)

Can we help you think this through? We have 25 years of Executive Search experience in the sales niche and over 1200 placements. You can trust us to guide you through this process. Give me a call at 770-888-0380.