

Competencies for Early-Career HR Professionals

Case Study

Real Sales or Wishful Thinking?

Robert sells shipping supplies for a warehouse supply wholesaler in Denver. He has been with Warehouse Supply for almost a year, hired fresh out of Collegiate U with a degree in marketing. Robert says it is his dream job. He always wanted to be in sales, and he loves the organized chaos of a warehouse as trucks and freight move in and out. He has a real understanding of warehousing, learned while he was working summers and part time as an order picker in a club store warehouse. He worked there until his junior year at Collegiate, when he had the accident on Highway 17 resulting in paraplegia. After the accident, he spent months in rehabilitation and had to take some time off from school. Then, because he was in a wheelchair, he could not go back to his job as order picker in the warehouse. He still completed his marketing degree, though. It just took him a little longer.

“I really like sales,” Robert says, “It gets me out and about, and I enjoy working with the customers. I was afraid my wheelchair would put people off, and I’d be stuck behind a desk for the rest of my life. I’d hate that. I’m thankful that I have the accessible van and can drive my own route. I know I’m a little slower than some of the guys, but I think I’ve earned their respect, and I like the challenge. I don’t always make the numbers, but people need to know that there is a lot more that a paraplegic *can* do than what he *can’t* do.”

Unfortunately, sales have been down for Warehouse Supply for the last two quarters. When consumers buy less merchandise like toys, clothes and gadgets, there are fewer shipments in and out of warehouses and less demand for warehouse supplies. Like most other sales organizations, Warehouse Supply compensates its sales staff with commission and bonuses in addition to base salary. Besides the sales staff, management-level employees also receive bonuses based on sales numbers. When sales shrink, everybody feels the pinch.

Marty is the sales manager for Robert’s district. When Marty interviewed Robert for the job, he was impressed with Robert’s knowledge of warehousing, his enthusiasm for sales and his outgoing personality. He had never hired anyone in a wheelchair before, but he thought, “What the heck, I think this guy can do the job, and we should give him a try.” Robert learned fast, and once the customers got used to the idea of a guy in a wheelchair in the warehouse, things seemed to be fine, although Marty had to admit that Robert’s sales numbers were never outstanding. Most months, Robert’s sales are at or near the bottom of the pack. “He’s just a little slower,” Marty said. “By the time he gets that van parked and gets his chair in and out, he just can’t get around to as many customers in a day as the other guys. But he does all right, and he makes a lot of calls from the office. Can’t say he’s not on top of his customers’ needs. He takes good care of them.”

With sales down, Marty is getting pressure from Frank Bishoff, Warehouse Supply’s vice president of sales at the home office in Phoenix, Ariz. Frank is always a little edgy when bonuses are due, but this time he is really on Marty. He called again this morning. “Hey Marty, what’s going on out there? All I see is inventory stacking up, and your sales numbers going down! I know everybody’s sliding a little in this economy, but your second

quarter numbers are terrible. You've got to move some product, and move it now! I'm getting pressure from the guys upstairs. You know that everybody's bonus is riding on this, and we're nearly at the end of the quarter. I'll be in Denver at the end of the month. We're taking a closer look at your numbers and your people. You'd better tell anybody who's not up to speed that it has got to change—or they're going to be gone. Whatever it takes, Marty, get those numbers in now!"

Marty has three weeks before Frank comes to Denver. "Heck, if they'll just take it easy until the next quarter, we'll be fine," thinks Marty. "I know our numbers are a little flat right now, but we'll have big orders next quarter, when Quality Retail buys for its anniversary sale. I just wish we had those numbers now; then Frank and his cronies would leave us alone. I think I'll give Robert a call. Quality Retail is his account. If he'd just write up its anniversary sale orders today and get them in the system, we'd all be off the hook. Why not? Frank said whatever it takes. We can always back the numbers out at the end of the quarter if need be, and Robert can square up the account with Quality later. Besides, he might just save his own job. Why should I take the heat alone? It's time he knew Frank has always thought it was a lousy idea to hire a guy in a wheelchair. Maybe Robert does belong in a desk job."

Warehouse Supply's HR department is located at the home office in Phoenix, and Marty has never had anything to do with HR. A representative from Phoenix comes to Denver occasionally to do some training—usually sexual harassment—and Marty knows there is an employee handbook, but he has never read it beyond the statement he signed concerning employment at will. Considering the pressure he is under from Frank, he believes the focus for sales at Warehouse Supply is on making the numbers and not on much else.

"There's no harm in getting the orders in early," Marty muses. "Besides, we can always back the numbers out later if we need to. And this way everyone gets their bonuses. Isn't that what they really want anyway?"

Is there an ethical issue here? If so, what is the issue, and how should it be addressed?