Topgrading For Sales

WHY TOPGRADING IS CRITICAL FOR SALES TEAMS

INTRODUCTION: WHY YOUR SALES TEAM NEEDS TOPGRADING

Every sales leader knows the pain of a bad hire. The missed quota, the team morale drain, the wasted training dollars, and the months of underperformance that somehow still look better on paper than the alternative of cutting someone loose. In sales, talent is everything. A top performer can bring in ten times the revenue of an average one, while a poor performer can actively damage customer relationships and brand reputation. This is where **Topgrading For Sales** becomes not just a hiring methodology, but a competitive advantage.

Topgrading, a system originally developed by Dr. Brad Smart, is a rigorous talent management process designed to help organizations consistently hire, develop, and retain “A players” — the top 10% of talent available for a given role. When applied to sales, Topgrading transforms the way teams are built. It replaces gut-feel hiring with a structured, evidence-based approach that uncovers a candidate's true track record, weaknesses, and potential. This article will walk you through everything you need to know about **Topgrading For Sales**, including the core principles, the step-by-step interview process, implementation strategies, and proven results.

WHAT IS TOPGRADING? A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Topgrading is built on a simple yet powerful premise: hire only A players, and systematically avoid B and C players. In the Topgrading framework, an A player is someone who fits the role and the culture so well that they are in the top 10% of people available for that position at that salary level. A B player meets expectations but rarely exceeds them, and a C player falls short. The goal of Topgrading is to minimize the number of B and C players in your organization by using a highly structured, thorough interview process.

The methodology relies heavily on a chronological, in-depth interview called the **Topgrading Interview** (formerly known as the TORC — Time-line, Opportunities, Reasons, Conclusions — interview). Instead of asking hypothetical questions like “Tell me about a time you overcame a challenge,” the Topgrading interviewer walks through each position the candidate has held, from college to the present day. For every role, the interviewer digs into accomplishments, failures, reasons for leaving, and the candidate’s self-assessed strengths and weaknesses. This “pattern-matching” approach reveals consistent themes — both good and bad — that more accurately predict future performance.

Sales is a high-stakes, high-pressure environment. According to numerous studies, the top 20% of salespeople generate 80% of the revenue. Even a single A player can dramatically outperform an entire team of B players. Conversely, a bad sales hire can cost a company three to five times the person’s annual salary when you factor in lost opportunities, management time, and team disruption.

Topgrading For Sales addresses three core problems that plague traditional hiring in sales:

- **Inaccurate self-reporting:** Sales candidates are naturally skilled at selling themselves. They can exaggerate achievements and downplay failures. Topgrading’s chronological interview method forces them to reveal detailed specifics, making it much harder to hide gaps.
- **High turnover:** The average sales turnover rate hovers around 30% to 40% annually. Topgrading dramatically reduces turnover by ensuring a strong fit between the candidate’s genuine abilities and the role’s demands.
- **Lack of team synergy:** One C player can poison the culture of an entire sales floor. By consistently hiring A players, you create a high-performance culture where top talent attracts more top talent.

THE TOPGRADING INTERVIEW METHOD FOR SALES ROLES

The heart of **Topgrading For Sales** is the structured interview. Unlike conventional sales interviews that may focus heavily on personality or charisma, the Topgrading interview is an evidence-based, deep dive into a candidate’s career history. Here are the key components.

Step 1: The Pre-Screen Call

Before the full interview, a brief phone screen (15–20 minutes) is used to verify basic qualifications and to give the candidate a clear understanding of the role. The screener asks a few open-ended questions about recent sales success, reasons for leaving past roles, and expectations. This is also a chance to assess communication skills, but the real evaluation happens later.

Step 2: The Chronological Deep Dive (The

Core of Topgrading)

This is the longest and most critical part of the process, typically lasting 90 to 120 minutes. The interviewer systematically goes through every job the candidate has held, starting with the most recent. For each role, the interviewer asks for:

1. **Responsibilities:** What was the territory, quota, average deal size, and sales cycle?
2. **Accomplishments:** What specific numbers did you achieve? How did you rank against peers? What awards did you earn?
3. **Failures or mistakes:** What did you not do well? What would your manager say were your weaknesses in that role?
4. **Reasons for leaving:** Was it voluntary or involuntary? What was the exact circumstance?
5. **Self-assessment:** On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your overall performance in that role? Why not a 10?

This pattern reveals recurring themes. A candidate who consistently “left for more money” or “had a bad manager” may be a C player hiding behind excuses. Meanwhile, a candidate who openly discusses their weaknesses and demonstrates growth is likely an A player with self-awareness.

Step 3: The TORC Technique (Time-line, Opportunities, Reasons, Conclusions)

The TORC technique is a specific questioning strategy used within the chronological interview. Interviewers are trained to listen for specific “tells.” For example, if a candidate describes every job as a success but cannot recall a single failure, that’s a red flag. The interviewer will probe for specific **sales metrics** — quota attainment percentages, number of closed deals, pipeline value — and compare them across roles. Inconsistencies are explored with follow-up questions.

Step 4: Reference Checking (The Two-Hour Call)

Topgrading treats reference checking as a serious investigative tool, not a formality. The interviewer calls three to five former managers, peers, and direct reports. The key is to ask very specific, behavioral questions: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate this person’s closing ability? What evidence can you share?” The reference calls often confirm or refute the patterns identified in the candidate interview. Many Topgrading practitioners use a structured reference script to ensure consistency.

KEY SALES COMPETENCIES ASSESSED THROUGH TOPGRADING

When using **Topgrading For Sales**, you must first define what an A player looks like in your specific context. Sales roles vary widely — inside sales, field sales, enterprise sales, channel sales, and so on. Here are some common competencies that Topgrading interviews are designed to uncover:

- **Hunting vs. Farming:** Is the candidate better at opening new accounts or growing existing ones? The chronological interview reveals which types of roles they have succeeded in.
- **Closing ability:** Can they consistently ask for the order and handle objections? Look for patterns of quota achievement and references from former managers.
- **Resilience:** Sales involves constant rejection. Topgrading interviews uncover how the candidate handled periods of low performance. Did they blame the economy, or did they change their approach and succeed?
- **Consultative selling skills:** Ask for examples of complex, multi-stakeholder deals. How did they navigate internal politics and customer needs?
- **Coachability:** A players are open to feedback. Topgrading gauges this by asking candidates to describe times they changed their sales process based on a manager’s advice — and what the outcome was.

IMPLEMENTING TOPGRADING IN YOUR SALES ORGANIZATION

Transitioning to a Topgrading-based talent system requires commitment. But the payoff — a high-performing sales team with low turnover — is immense. Below is a practical implementation roadmap.

1. Build a Job Scorecard

Before you interview anyone, define the mission, outcomes, and competencies for the sales role. A scorecard is not a job description; it’s a performance blueprint. What exactly must the person accomplish in the first 90 days, 12 months, and beyond? What behaviors differentiate A players from B players? For example: “Consistently closes 120% of quarterly quota using a consultative approach.”

2. Source Aggressively for A Players

Topgrading assumes that A players are rare and often passive. You cannot rely on job postings alone. Use networking, referrals from your current A players, industry events, and LinkedIn sourcing. When you find a potential A player, move quickly.

3. Train Your Interviewers

Topgrading is a skill. Your sales managers, HR partners, and even executives need to be trained in the chronological interview technique. They must learn to ask “why” repeatedly without being confrontational, and to spot inconsistencies. Many organizations invest in a certified Topgrading facilitator or internal master trainer.

4. Conduct the Full Topgrading Interview Sequence

For every sales candidate, follow the structured process: phone screen, 90+ minute chronological interview, and two-hour reference calls. Do not skip steps. The reference calls are especially critical for sales roles where exaggeration is common.

5. Use a Candidate Scorecard

After the interview, evaluate the candidate against the job scorecard. Rate them on a scale (A, B, or C) based on evidence, not gut feel. Discuss discrepancies with other interviewers. The goal is consensus.

6. Onboard for Performance

A player selection is only half the battle. Once hired, provide a structured onboarding plan that covers product knowledge, sales methodology, territory strategy, and cultural integration. Topgrading includes regular feedback loops — typically weekly one-on-ones — to ensure the new hire stays on track.

COMMON CHALLENGES AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

Adopting **Topgrading For Sales** is not without obstacles. Here are the most common ones and practical solutions.

Challenge 1: Time Commitment

Managers often complain that Topgrading interviews take too long. Yes, a 90-minute interview plus two hours of reference calls is significant. But consider the cost of a bad sales hire. The upfront time investment saves months of remediation. Solution: Use phone screens to filter out clearly unqualified candidates. Reserve the deep dive for those who pass the first gate.

Challenge 2: Manager Resistance

Some managers are comfortable with their traditional hiring instincts. They may feel that Topgrading is “too academic” or “unnatural.” Overcome this by sharing data from your own organization: show the difference in revenue and retention between hires made with Topgrading and those made without. Start with a pilot team and measure results.

Challenge 3: Legal Compliance

Because Topgrading interviews are intensive and ask many questions about past performance, some organizations worry about legal risks. However, as long as you ask the same questions of every candidate and focus on job-related competencies, you are within legal bounds. Avoid personal questions about age, marital status, or health. Train interviewers on equal employment opportunity (EEO