THE ANATOMY OF AN

ELITE SDR CALL

How to Measure, Coach and Improve
Outbound Sales Conversations

CHRIS HARASTY

HARASTY CONSULTING
Brisbane, Australia

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Examples are included to illustrate coaching and evaluation principles. Names, circumstances and identifying details may have been changed where appropriate.

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Introduction

Two sales managers listen to the same outbound call.

The first manager thinks it was successful. The SDR sounded confident, handled the prospect's initial resistance and booked a meeting.

The second manager reaches a different conclusion. The SDR dominated the conversation, conducted almost no discovery and proposed a meeting before establishing whether the prospect had a meaningful reason to attend.

Both managers can defend their opinions. Neither has a shared standard against which to evaluate the call.

The SDR receives conflicting feedback. One manager says, "Keep doing what you're doing." The other says, "You need to ask better questions." Neither explains precisely which behaviours should continue, which should change or what the SDR should do differently on the next call.

This is one of the central problems in SDR coaching.

Most organisations know how many calls their SDRs make and how many appointments they book. Far fewer can explain why one call was effective, why another failed or which specific behaviour would produce the greatest improvement.

Without a consistent method of evaluation, coaching becomes subjective. Managers rely on personal experience, individual preferences and general impressions. SDRs receive advice that sounds reasonable but is difficult to practise. Business leaders see the results but cannot always distinguish a capability problem from a problem with the market, data, territory, offer or timing.

The organisation is measuring activity and outcomes without fully understanding performance.

The outcome is not the performance

The purpose of outbound prospecting is to create qualified sales opportunities. Appointments matter, but a booked meeting does not automatically mean the call was good.

The prospect may already have been interested. The SDR may have called at exactly the right time. The company's reputation or offering may have carried the conversation. A cooperative prospect may agree to a meeting despite receiving little value from the call.

A weak call can still produce a booked meeting.

The reverse is also true. An SDR may conduct an excellent conversation, ask thoughtful questions and correctly determine that the prospect is not suitable. No appointment is booked, but the SDR has prevented an unqualified meeting from entering the pipeline and consuming additional sales resources.

A strong call does not always produce a booked meeting.

If managers judge calls primarily by whether a meeting was booked, they risk rewarding poor behaviours that happened to succeed and criticising good behaviours that led to the correct decision.

The outcome should be recorded, but it must be separated from the quality of the SDR's performance. That distinction is fundamental to fair evaluation.

Why this matters commercially

Inconsistent call evaluation is not merely a coaching inconvenience. It has direct commercial consequences.

When managers cannot identify the behaviours affecting performance, SDRs take longer to develop. The same mistakes are repeated across hundreds of calls. Training becomes broad rather than targeted, and managers spend valuable time giving feedback that produces little behavioural change.

Poor evaluation also affects pipeline quality. SDRs may be rewarded for booking meetings regardless of qualification, relevance or genuine buyer interest. Account executives then spend time attending conversations that were unlikely to progress.

At the same time, capable SDRs may be coached in the wrong areas because leaders cannot distinguish between skill problems and external factors. A decline in appointments might be caused by poor data, an unsuitable target market, weak positioning, low contact rates or changing market conditions. Increasing call targets or criticising the SDR will not correct those problems.

For business and sales leaders, the consequences include:

- Longer SDR ramp times
- Repeated mistakes across a high volume of calls
- Inconsistent conversion performance
- Wasted management and coaching time
- Poor-quality meetings entering the pipeline
- Difficulty identifying the true cause of underperformance

A reliable evaluation system gives leaders more than a call score. It helps them understand whether the organisation has an activity problem, a capability problem or a broader commercial problem.

The problem with conventional call reviews

Most call reviews are conducted with good intentions. A manager listens to a recording, identifies several weaknesses and gives the SDR feedback.

The difficulty is that the feedback is often broad:

- Ask better questions.
- Improve your listening.
- Build more rapport.
- Sound more confident.
- Stop sounding scripted.
- Improve your objection handling.

These statements identify areas of concern, but they do not define the behaviour that needs to change.

"Ask better questions" could mean asking questions that cannot be answered from the prospect's website. It could mean following up on the first answer, exploring the consequences of a problem or asking a question that causes the prospect to think differently.

Each represents a separate capability and requires a different coaching response.

Feedback becomes useful only when the SDR can understand what happened, why it mattered and what to do differently next time.

The origin of the framework

The framework presented in this book grew from practical experience coaching businesses and outbound sales teams.

Over 20 years of coaching, I have worked with more than 3,000 clients across 85 industries. Across different organisations, markets and sales teams, I repeatedly encountered the same problem: managers could often recognise that a call was strong or weak, but they did not always have a consistent method for explaining why.

Different reviewers focused on different aspects of the conversation, and feedback was frequently influenced by the outcome.

There was a need for a more disciplined approach: one that could separate the major capabilities involved in an SDR call, define observable standards and connect evaluation directly to coaching.

The result is the Harasty Consulting SDR Coaching Framework.

The framework combines practical outbound sales experience with evidence-based coaching principles. It is designed to make call evaluation more consistent, transparent and useful. It does not attempt to reduce a human conversation to a single number. Instead, it provides a structured way to identify the behaviours that influenced the quality of the call.

Evaluating observable behaviour

The framework evaluates six factors:

- Call Control
- Inquiry
- Responsiveness
- Commercial Insight
- Rapport
- Vocal Delivery

Across these factors are 26 distinct skills. They cover the SDR's ability to gain attention, move through the call, manage time, ask useful questions, identify problems, listen, adapt, handle resistance, establish value, demonstrate credibility, create rapport and secure an appropriate next step.

Each skill is assessed through observable behavioural standards. Performance is evaluated on a five-level scale ranging from Poor to Elite.

The purpose of these levels is not to label the SDR. They describe the quality of the behaviour demonstrated in a particular call.

Every score must be supported by evidence. A manager or coach should be able to identify the relevant moment, explain why it supports the evaluation and show what stronger performance would have looked like.

This changes the coaching conversation.

Instead of saying, "You did not listen," the manager can identify what the prospect said, show how the SDR responded and explain how the next question failed to use the information provided.

Instead of saying, "Your discovery was weak," the manager can show that the SDR obtained basic information about the current situation but did not explore who was affected, what had been tried or what consequences the problem was creating.

The discussion moves from opinion to behaviour.

A framework for coaching, not criticism

The objective is not to produce a score for its own sake.

A detailed evaluation may identify several weaknesses, but an SDR cannot consciously correct everything during the next conversation. Asking someone to remember a new opening, several discovery questions, multiple objection responses, a revised value proposition and a different close is more likely to make the call sound mechanical than improve it.

Effective coaching requires prioritisation.

The manager must determine which behaviour will create the greatest improvement and convert that priority into something the SDR can practise and apply.

The framework is designed to answer five practical questions:

1. What did the SDR do well?
2. Which behaviours limited the call?
3. What evidence supports that conclusion?
4. What should the SDR improve first?
5. What should the SDR do differently on the next call?

This creates a direct connection between evaluation, coaching and development.

Consistency without oversimplification

An outbound call is not a single skill.

An SDR can sound confident while demonstrating little buyer understanding. A friendly conversation can create rapport without uncovering meaningful information. A commercially insightful SDR can ask excellent questions and still fail to secure a clear next step.

For this reason, the framework evaluates related capabilities independently.

Rapport is not discovery. Confidence is not credibility. Talk share is not active listening. Booking the appointment does not prove that the prospect received value.

A strength in one area should not inflate the evaluation of another. Similarly, one weakness should not reduce every aspect of the call.

The framework allows the scores to disagree because real performance is uneven. Those differences reveal where coaching is needed.

The supporting role of artificial intelligence

The framework can be applied by sales managers and coaches without artificial intelligence.

AI provides an opportunity to apply the same methodology across a much larger number of calls. It can locate evidence, assess behaviour against defined standards and help managers identify patterns that would be difficult to detect manually.

However, AI should support the methodology rather than replace managerial judgement.

An AI system without a well-defined framework can reproduce the same subjectivity found in human call reviews. The framework defines what should be measured and how it should be evaluated. AI can then help apply those standards consistently.

Managers remain responsible for context, judgement, coaching and development.

The promise of this book

This book is written for business leaders, sales leaders, sales managers and coaches responsible for improving outbound sales performance.

By the end of the book, you will be able to listen to an SDR call, identify the behaviours that affected its quality, evaluate those behaviours consistently and convert the evaluation into a focused coaching action.

You will learn how to:

- Separate call outcomes from SDR capability
- Recognise the behaviours that influence call quality
- Evaluate performance using clear behavioural standards
- Support feedback with specific evidence
- Avoid common scoring and coaching errors
- Select the highest-leverage improvement
- Track individual and team development
- Use AI to support evaluation without surrendering human judgement

You do not need to be a data scientist, psychologist or AI specialist. The framework is rigorous, but its purpose is practical: to help you understand what happened during a call and what the SDR should do better next time.

The first part of this book explains why conventional coaching often fails and establishes the principles required for fair evaluation.

The second part examines the six factors and 26 skills that make up an effective SDR conversation.

The third part explains scoring, evidence, weighting and the most common evaluation errors.

The final part shows how to turn call evaluation into focused coaching, individual development and stronger team performance.

The central argument is straightforward:

You cannot coach SDR performance consistently until you can evaluate it consistently.

Chapter 1: Why Most SDR Coaching Fails

A sales manager reviews a call with an SDR.

The manager identifies a weak opening, several missed discovery opportunities, an ineffective response to an objection and a rushed attempt to book a meeting. The feedback is detailed, accurate and delivered with good intentions.

The SDR agrees with it.

The following week, the manager listens to another call and hears the same behaviours.

This is a familiar experience in sales teams. Managers provide feedback, SDRs understand it, yet little changes in the conversations that follow.

The problem is not necessarily the quality of the advice or the willingness of the SDR to improve. It is often that the organisation has mistaken feedback for coaching.

Feedback explains what happened. Coaching creates a change in future behaviour.

That difference is at the centre of why so much SDR coaching fails.

The illusion of coaching

Most sales organisations can point to activities they describe as coaching. Managers listen to recorded calls, comment on performance during team meetings and review results in one-to-one sessions. New scripts and objection responses are distributed. SDRs participate in role plays, training sessions and performance reviews.

All these activities can contribute to coaching. None guarantees that coaching has occurred.

The true test is not whether feedback was delivered. It is whether the SDR can perform the relevant behaviour more effectively in a future call.

An SDR may leave a coaching session knowing that the discovery was weak but still be unable to conduct stronger discovery. Another may understand that the call sounded scripted but not know how to retain structure while responding naturally. A third may memorise a new objection response without learning how to recognise the concern behind the prospect's words.

Knowledge is important, but knowing what good performance looks like is not the same as being able to produce it during a live conversation.

Effective coaching must bridge that gap.

Diagnosis must come before advice

Imagine an SDR whose conversation-to-meeting conversion rate has declined.

A manager might recommend more calls, a revised opening, additional discovery questions or greater confidence when handling objections. The manager may decide that the SDR should follow the script more closely or that the team should target a different market.

Any of these recommendations might be correct. Without diagnosis, they are guesses.

The conversion decline may have been caused by poor contact data, a change in the target market, a weaker offer, lower call-answer rates or a difficult territory. It may also reflect an SDR capability problem, but even then, the manager must identify which behaviour is limiting performance.

Prescribing more activity will not correct poor discovery. Rewriting the script will not solve weak listening. Objection-handling training will not help if the real problem is that the SDR has failed to establish relevance before the objection occurs.

Good coaching begins by identifying the actual performance gap.

This requires the manager to separate three questions:

1. Is the SDR completing sufficient activity?
2. Is the commercial environment giving the SDR a reasonable opportunity to succeed?
3. How effectively is the SDR conducting the conversations that occur?

Activity data answers the first question. Market, campaign and pipeline information help answer the second. Call evaluation is required for the third.

When these questions are conflated, managers may respond to a skill problem with a higher activity target or treat a market problem as an individual performance failure.

Neither response produces improvement.

Activity management is not coaching

SDR teams are commonly managed through activity and outcome measures such as calls made, conversations completed, emails sent, appointments booked, opportunities accepted and pipeline created.

These measures are necessary. Leaders need to know whether the SDR is doing the work and whether the outbound function is producing commercial results.

However, activity metrics do not explain the quality of the conversation.

If an SDR makes 70 calls and books no meetings, the dashboard shows the result but not the cause. The SDR may have reached very few prospects. The list may have been poorly targeted. The calls may have opened weakly. The SDR may have generated interest but failed to close. Each explanation requires a different response.

Increasing the call target from 70 to 80 might generate another conversation, but it does not develop capability. The organisation simply exposes the same behaviour to more prospects.

Performance management asks whether the SDR is completing the expected activity and producing the required results.

Coaching asks what the SDR is doing during the conversation and how that behaviour can improve.

A well-managed team needs both. Problems arise when leaders use activity pressure as a substitute for skill development.

General feedback produces general intentions

Many coaching statements sound useful because they describe desirable qualities:

- Be more confident.
- Ask better questions.
- Listen more carefully.
- Build stronger rapport.
- Be more consultative.
- Create more value.

The SDR will usually agree. Few people would argue that they should ask worse questions or listen less carefully.

Agreement creates the impression that the coaching has succeeded. However, the feedback has not yet defined an action.

“Ask better questions” is not a behaviour the SDR can switch on before the next call. A practical coaching instruction would identify a specific action, such as asking at least one follow-up question before moving to a new topic.

“Listen more carefully” is equally broad. The manager might instead ask the SDR to summarise the prospect’s main concern before responding.

“Build stronger rapport” could become an instruction to acknowledge the prospect’s stated situation before introducing another question.

The more precisely a behaviour is defined, the easier it becomes to practise, observe and review.

Moving from a general concern to focused practice involves four levels:

1. **General concern:** The SDR is not listening effectively.

2. **Observed behaviour:** The SDR moves to the next prepared question without using the prospect's answer.
3. **Target behaviour:** The SDR acknowledges or summarises the answer before continuing.
4. **Practice action:** The SDR listens to a sample response and practises a short summary followed by a relevant question.

The purpose of diagnosis is to move from a general concern to a specific, coachable behaviour. The final step is to translate that behaviour into relevant practice.

Managers often coach personal preference

Experienced sales managers develop strong views about what works. Those views are shaped by their markets, previous roles, personal communication styles and the sales environments in which they succeeded.

This experience is valuable, but it can also produce inconsistent standards.

A manager who built a career through direct, assertive selling may reward SDRs who control the conversation firmly. Another may prefer a more consultative approach and interpret the same behaviour as excessive pressure.

One manager may believe that the script should be followed closely. Another may consider visible adherence to the script a sign of weak capability.

The result is not simply disagreement between managers. It creates uncertainty for the SDR.

If the expected standard changes according to the reviewer, the SDR learns to satisfy the manager rather than develop a reliable sales capability. Feedback becomes a reflection of personal style instead of an evaluation of observable behaviour.

A structured framework does not remove managerial judgement. It gives that judgement a shared foundation.

Managers can still consider context and exercise professional discretion, but they evaluate the same capabilities, use the same definitions and support their conclusions with evidence.

This makes coaching more consistent without requiring every SDR to sound identical.

When the script becomes the standard

Scripts are valuable tools. They help SDRs understand the purpose of the call, communicate the core message and navigate common situations.

For inexperienced SDRs, a script reduces cognitive demand. They do not need to invent every sentence while also listening to the prospect, managing time and deciding what to ask next.

The problem arises when script adherence becomes the main definition of quality.

A prospect may provide an answer that changes the direction of the conversation. The SDR must decide whether to explore it or return to the next prepared question. If the organisation rewards script compliance, the safer choice is often to ignore the answer and continue.

The SDR delivers the intended words but loses the conversation.

At the other extreme, telling SDRs to “forget the script and sound natural” can remove useful structure. Calls wander, important questions are missed and the next step becomes unclear.

The goal is structured adaptability.

The SDR should understand the purpose behind each stage of the call well enough to respond naturally while still moving the conversation forward. The script provides a route, but the prospect determines where attention is required.

Coaching must therefore assess more than whether the correct words were spoken. It must examine how the SDR listened, adapted and connected each part of the conversation to what came before it.

Generic training misses individual needs

Sales training is often delivered at team level. Everyone learns the same opening, questioning model, objection framework or closing technique.

This can establish a useful common foundation, particularly when a new campaign or process is introduced. It is less effective as a substitute for individual coaching.

Four SDRs with similar conversion rates may have entirely different development needs.

One may struggle to gain permission to continue beyond the opening. Another may open well but accept the prospect’s first answer without exploring it. A third may conduct strong discovery but fail to connect the findings to a relevant value proposition. A fourth may create sufficient interest but never ask for a specific next step.

Giving all four SDRs the same training is unlikely to address each problem.

Individual coaching requires individual evidence.

The manager must identify what the SDR is doing, determine which behaviour matters most and select an intervention suited to that gap.

Generic training teaches the team what good performance should include. Individual coaching helps each SDR produce it.

Too much feedback prevents focus

A detailed call review can identify many weaknesses. The opening may have been generic, the discovery superficial and the value proposition too broad. The SDR may have missed several opportunities to explore the prospect's answers, responded defensively to an objection, spoken for too long and rushed the close.

A conscientious manager may feel obliged to address every issue. The resulting feedback is comprehensive but difficult to use.

During a live call, an SDR cannot consciously monitor eight new behaviours while listening to the prospect and deciding what to say next. Trying to do so increases mental demand and often makes the conversation less natural.

Effective coaching requires prioritisation.

The manager should consider which weakness had the greatest effect on the call, which improvement would benefit other areas and what behaviour can be observed during the next conversation.

If the SDR repeatedly ignores useful answers, improving active listening may also strengthen discovery, curiosity and relevance. That makes it a higher-leverage focus than adjusting a single sentence in the close.

The other weaknesses should not be forgotten. They can be recorded and addressed in sequence. But the SDR needs one clear priority for the next stage of development.

Advice without practice rarely survives the call

An SDR can understand feedback during a calm coaching session and still fail to apply it when speaking to a prospect.

Live conversations create pressure. The SDR must listen, interpret, recall relevant information, choose a response and continue speaking without long delays. Under these conditions, familiar habits return.

This is why advice alone rarely creates reliable behavioural change.

A practical coaching cycle includes:

1. Identifying the behaviour
2. Showing the evidence
3. Explaining why it mattered
4. Demonstrating a stronger approach

5. Practising the new behaviour
6. Applying it during real calls
7. Reviewing subsequent evidence
8. Reinforcing or adjusting the behaviour

Many coaching sessions stop after the third or fourth step. The SDR understands the recommendation but has not practised it sufficiently to use it naturally.

Role play is useful when it reproduces the decision the SDR must make. If the target behaviour is following up on a first answer, the practice should give the SDR several different answers and require an appropriate follow-up question. Repeating a memorised script will not develop that skill.

Practice must match the behaviour being coached.

Coaching without follow-through becomes commentary

A manager may provide excellent feedback and never return to it.

At the next review, a new call produces a new list of observations and a different coaching priority. The SDR moves from one concern to another without enough time or repetition to improve any of them.

This creates coaching activity without a development process.

A coaching priority should remain active until there is evidence of progress. The next call review should explicitly examine whether the SDR attempted the target behaviour, how effectively it was applied and what should happen next.

The behaviour may require further practice, a clearer example, a simpler first step or reinforcement across several calls. Once sufficient improvement is demonstrated, the manager can select a new priority.

Follow-through also allows the manager to distinguish understanding from execution. If the SDR can explain the desired behaviour but does not apply it, more information may not be the answer. The SDR may require deliberate practice, call preparation, prompts or closer reinforcement.

Coaching becomes developmental when one session connects to the next.

The manager's capacity problem

Sales managers face a practical limitation: they cannot listen to every call.

A manager responsible for several SDRs may have hundreds of recordings available each week. Reviewing even a small proportion takes time, particularly if the manager must locate relevant moments, document evidence and prepare individual feedback.

Calls are therefore reviewed irregularly, feedback is delayed and coaching quality varies with the manager's workload. Managers may select unusually good or poor calls, while recent conversations receive disproportionate attention.

A small sample can also create a misleading picture. One call may not represent the SDR's normal performance. A strong or weak result may reflect the prospect, timing or circumstances rather than a stable capability.

Technology can reduce the review burden by analysing more calls and identifying patterns. However, automation only helps when it applies a sound evaluation methodology. Faster subjective feedback is still subjective feedback.

The solution requires both scale and structure.

What effective SDR coaching requires

Effective coaching is a system rather than an isolated conversation.

It requires:

- **A clear performance model:** The organisation defines the capabilities that make up an effective SDR call.
- **Observable standards:** Managers evaluate demonstrated behaviour rather than personality, intention or general impression.
- **Specific evidence:** Feedback can be traced to an identifiable moment in the call.
- **Accurate diagnosis:** The manager separates activity, market and capability problems.
- **A focused priority:** The SDR works on the highest-leverage behaviour rather than attempting to correct everything.
- **Relevant practice:** The coaching activity develops the behaviour that has been identified.
- **Consistent follow-through:** Subsequent calls are reviewed for evidence of improvement.
- **Shared language:** Managers, coaches and SDRs use the same definitions when discussing performance.

When these elements are present, call reviews become more than commentary. They become part of a repeatable development process.

The purpose is not to make every SDR sound the same. It is to give each SDR a clear understanding of effective performance and a practical path towards it.

Coaching fails when feedback ends with an observation.

Coaching succeeds when the observation leads to a specific behaviour, the behaviour is practised, and improvement can be demonstrated in the calls that follow.

The next chapter examines what an effective SDR call actually looks like and why call quality must be understood as a combination of distinct, observable capabilities.