MANAGEMENT OF BUSINESS MANAGERS

When KPIs give the impression that everything is under control

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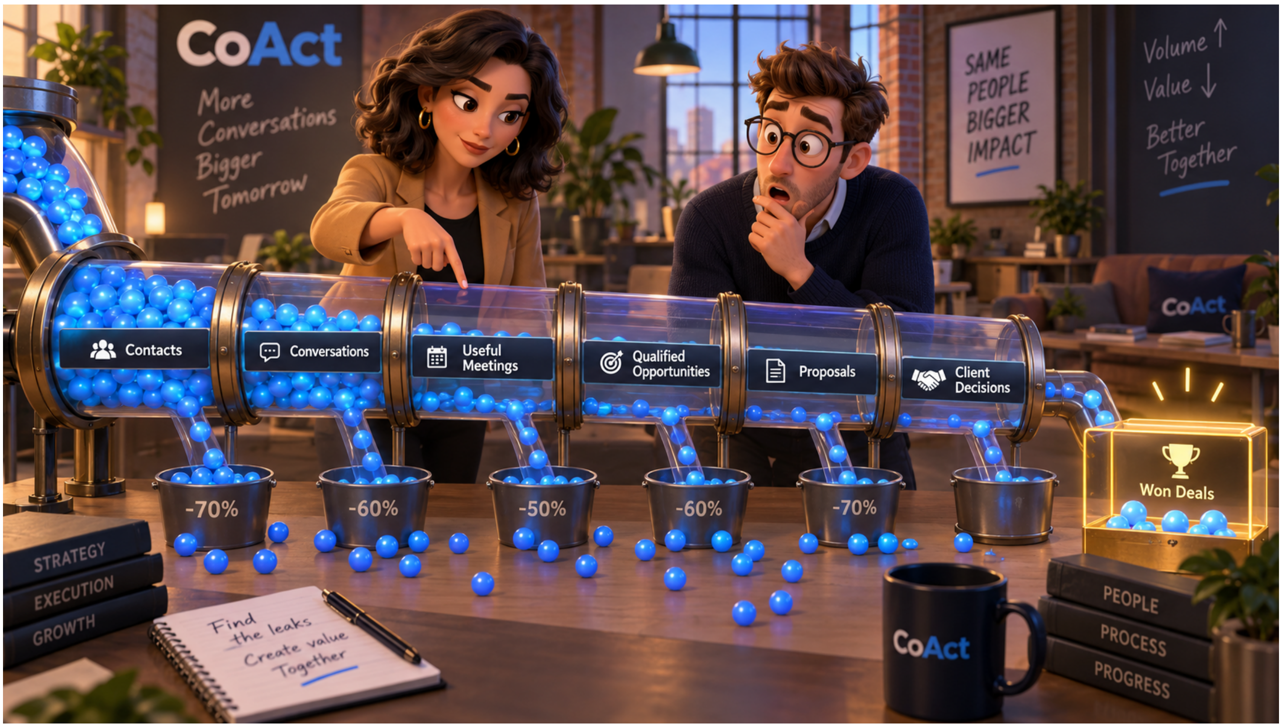

Green KPIs can hide a deteriorating commercial mechanism. To truly manage, you have to connect volumes to quality, transformation, and time.

Green indicators can reassure management while masking a deteriorating commercial performance. Measuring activity is not enough: one must also understand what it produces.

In many ESNs and consulting firms, reading a commercial dashboard takes just a few seconds. Prospecting activities increase. The number of identified opportunities rises. More proposals are sent to clients. The indicators are green.

The conclusion follows almost automatically: the team is working, the pipeline is filling up, and the activity is under control.

On paper, the reasoning stands. Commercial performance doesn't emerge from inaction. To sign more deals, you need to create contacts, provoke exchanges, detect needs, and present solutions.

But between each step, something can be lost. A lot, in fact.

An increase in activity does not guarantee that this activity creates more value. It could just as well mean that the team is putting more effort into achieving the same results — sometimes less.

When all activity indicators progress but deals do not follow, the problem is no longer about volume. It lies in transformation.

A dashboard can be green, and the commercial mechanism already jammed

Imagine a team of five Business Managers. In three months, they increase their prospecting actions by 30%. The number of opportunities recorded in the CRM grows by 20%. Commercial proposals sent out rise from forty to fifty-five.

Presented at an executive committee meeting, these figures are reassuring. They testify to visible mobilization and a pipeline that seems better fueled.

Yet, the number of signed deals remains the same. The average margin slightly decreases. Several proposals have gone unanswered for weeks, and some opportunities were never really qualified with the client.

The team is not inactive. It is even more active than before. But its commercial yield is decreasing. It now takes more contacts, more declared opportunities, and more proposals to produce the same number of signatures.

The dashboard faithfully describes the increase in effort. It does not spontaneously show the loss of efficiency occurring between steps.

Activity is visible. The value is much less so

Activity indicators have one strength: they are easy to count. A call was made or not. A meeting took place or not. A proposal was sent or not. The result fits neatly into a cell and can be compared without difficulty to the previous week.

Commercial value is more challenging to grasp. Did a conversation lead to a better understanding of the account? Can the interlocutor really influence a decision? Is the need confirmed or just mentioned? Does the proposal address a problem recognized as a priority? Has the client accepted a specific next step?

These questions resist tabs more. They force one to look at the content of the activity, not just its existence.

Two prospecting meetings can thus bear the same name in the CRM. The first ends with a cordial exchange and a vague promise to stay in touch. The second identifies a program, its schedule, encountered difficulties, involved parties, and a new meeting with the operational manager. The counter adds one unit in both cases. Commercially, these meetings have almost nothing in common.

At each step, some effort can disappear

Commercial activity is less like adding tasks than like a chain of transformations. Contact attempts must produce conversations. Conversations must lead to useful meetings. Meetings must give rise to qualified opportunities. Opportunities must lead to relevant solutions. Solutions must turn into client decisions.

Tracking each volume separately can give the impression that the chain is working. Yet, it suffices for a single transition to deteriorate for the entire activity to lose value.

If contact attempts increase without producing more responses, the targeting or approach needs examination. If meetings increase without creating more serious opportunities, the discovery might still be too superficial. If proposals multiply without decisions, the team likely proposes too early, to insufficiently engaged interlocutors or based on poorly qualified needs.

For instance, sending a proposal after a prospect merely asked for information allows declaring a concrete action. But if the context, decision criteria, competitors, budget, or purchasing process remain unknown, the document has little chance of becoming a deal. It inflates the indicator of proposals sent. It does not necessarily feed performance.

A volume only makes sense in relation to what it transforms — and with what transforms it afterward.

When activity becomes the goal, teams learn to produce activity

The issue is not the existence of KPIs. An organization that measures nothing ends up confusing perceptions, intentions, and results. Indicators provide essential benchmarks.

The problem arises when activity ceases to be a means and becomes a result in itself. Ten meetings, five opportunities, and three proposals are then considered complete performance, even if none of these steps truly bring closer to a client decision.

Teams quickly understand what triggers recognition or pressure. If the manager extensively comments on volumes but rarely questions their quality, the Business Managers adapt their behavior. They multiply actions easy to declare, create opportunities too early, and send proposals to demonstrate that the matter is progressing.

In the short term, the dashboard improves. In the medium term, the pipeline fills with fragile files. Forecasts become less reliable, follow-ups accumulate, and the conversion rate drops. Then management discovers, often several weeks late, that the announced dynamic didn't really exist.

The right question is not just: how many?

Managing activity involves keeping the volume indicators but systematically linking them to three other dimensions: quality, transformation, and time.

Quality helps to know if the action targets the right audience and produces actionable information. Transformation measures what each step generates: how many contacts become exchanges, how many meetings open a qualified opportunity, and how many proposals lead to a decision. Time finally reveals files that stagnate and indicators that remain artificially positive because nothing is ever really closed.

Take fifty-five proposals sent. The volume seems satisfactory. But how many were preceded by complete qualification? How many include a next step accepted by the client? How many are still active after thirty days? How many were won, lost, or abandoned — and for what reasons?

This reading doesn't replace volume. It gives it meaning. It enables distinguishing a team that accelerates from a team that pedals faster without moving further.

KPI must reveal problems, not cover them

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A useful dashboard is not for demonstrating all is well. It serves to highlight early on what requires a decision.

If prospecting actions increase but conversations do not, the manager can work on targeting and hooks. If opportunities increase but few reach sufficient qualification, they might need to revise entry criteria into the pipeline. If proposals accumulate without response, they might impose that no document goes out without an understood decision process and agreed next step.

In each case, the KPI doesn't provide the solution. It highlights where to look. The decision then arises from observing practices, exchanges with Business Managers, and the analysis of specific cases.

For instance, rather than asking the team to send ten more proposals, the manager might revisit the last ten lost or unanswered proposals. They look with the team for the moment when the commercial relationship weakened: wrong contact, misunderstood issue, lack of urgency, standard solution, price mentioned too early, or next step never secured. The analysis then offers a much more precise action lever than a new volume target.

Control reassures because it shows numbers. Steering occasionally disturbs more because it forces you to look at what these numbers do not produce.

Everything seems under control… until the result

Activity indicators rarely trigger an alert at the exact moment when performance starts to decline. For a while, the teams continue to call, meet, open opportunities, and send proposals. Volumes remain high. The machine seems to run.

The gap appears later when signatures don't arrive, forecasted revenue slips, or expected margins don't materialize. By then, several weeks of efforts have already been expended.

The manager's role is not to wait for the final result to contradict the dashboard. It's to spot, between steps, the first signs of less effective activity transformation.

During the next commercial review, do not settle for asking if the indicators are green. Choose a step in the chain and pose a more challenging question: what has the activity produced this week that really advanced?

A team can do more without moving further. As long as the dashboard doesn't allow seeing this difference, it doesn't provide control. It only gives the impression.

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