MANAGEMENT OF BUSINESS MANAGERS

When the same numbers don't tell the same story

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A KPI is never enough to explain a situation: it highlights a gap but doesn't reveal the causes or quality. This article shows how to transform an indicator into a useful diagnostic to better manage Business Managers.

A KPI never tells on its own what needs to be done. It signals a variance. The manager's work begins precisely where the dashboard ends.

In ESN and in consulting or engineering companies, some figures enjoy a special status. They seem objective, clean, uncontestable. They are produced at the end of the week, compared to a target, and often end up producing an automatic conclusion: the target is met or it is not.

Let's take one of the most classic indicators of sales management: the number of prospecting meetings conducted per week. The target is set at ten. The Business Manager held nine.

At first glance, the subject seems resolved. Nine is not ten. One meeting is missing. Therefore, more calls should be made, contact acceleration should be increased, or the agenda should be slightly busier the following week.

This interpretation has an advantage: it is quick. It also bypasses the need to think.

The figure measures a result. It does not explain the causes, the quality, or the consequences.

The KPI may be a verdict... or the start of an investigation

Faced with a result below the target, some managers immediately seek to correct the figure. Their reasoning is simple: if volume drops, volume must be reinstated. The KPI then becomes a verdict, followed by an instruction.

Others begin by asking questions. Why nine meetings this week? What has changed compared to previous weeks? What accounts were targeted? How many contacts actually led to a useful conversation? What happened during those nine meetings?

In both cases, the data is identical. But the managerial posture is not. In the first, the figure is used to judge. In the second, it is used to understand.

Let's imagine Thomas, a junior Business Manager. He held nine meetings because he spent much of his week chasing unqualified leads, over-preparing each approach, and accepting multiple internal solicitations without prioritizing effectively. His nine likely reveals an issue with organization, targeting, or methodology.

Now consider Leïla, an experienced Business Manager. She also held nine meetings. But she deliberately abandoned a too broad campaign, spent more time on three well-chosen accounts, and as a result of her conversations, obtained two qualification meetings and access to a new decision-maker. Her nine doesn’t have the same meaning. Simply telling her to "do more" could even damage her performance.

A decrease in volume does not always mean a decrease in performance

The number of meetings may decrease because the Business Manager poorly manages their time, targets the wrong people, or uses a pitch that gives no reason to meet. In this case, the decrease is indeed a warning signal. It calls for action: reworking the week, tightening priorities, improving the pitch, or providing more prospecting support.

But the same movement can reflect progress. The Business Manager qualifies contacts better before requesting a meeting. They refuse polite exchanges that fill the calendar without opening any prospects. Their conversations last longer because they delve deeper into understanding the account. They secure fewer meetings, but each generates more information, more relationships, or more opportunities.

The trap lies in assuming that a high volume proves activity intensity and that a lower volume necessarily reveals slackness. A busy schedule can hide a lot of dispersion. Conversely, an apparently less busy week may set the stage for more solid business.

For example, fifteen twenty-minute meetings with peripheral contacts can flatter the dashboard without advancing a single account. Six prepared exchanges with program managers, supplemented by mapping work and several connections, can have far greater commercial value.

By trying too hard to fix the indicator, you end up damaging it

When a manager clings to the raw figure, the team quickly learns what is truly expected: not to create business value, but to produce the data that avoids the Monday morning discussion.

The Business Manager then broadens their targeting, solicits less relevant contacts, accepts meetings without a clear objective, or turns an informal exchange into a "prospecting meeting" just to check the box. The indicator rises. The quality of work falls.

This behavior is not necessarily an attempt to cheat. It is often a perfectly rational adaptation to the management system. If all the attention is on the number, everyone ends up optimizing the number.

We then confuse piloting with control. Control checks that an instruction was executed. Piloting seeks to understand if the actions taken genuinely bring the expected result closer. Both are necessary, but they don't answer the same question.

A good KPI doesn't replace the managerial conversation. It gives it a starting point.

Don't remove objectives. Change the way you read them

The conclusion is not that activity objectives should be abandoned. A sales team without benchmarks often ends up navigating on impressions, with "very busy" weeks whose contribution to portfolio development cannot be truly measured.

The objective of ten meetings remains useful. It reflects a level of activity deemed necessary to feed the pipeline. It allows for spotting a trend, comparing one period to another, and opening a discussion before commercial results deteriorate.

But it should be read with other information: the relevance of the contacts met, progress in accounts, follow-ups obtained, the number of genuinely qualified opportunities, the quality of upcoming actions, and of course, the transformation over time.

If Thomas remains at nine for four weeks, with no new entry doors and few follow-ups, the manager has a consistent set of indicators. They can observe his method, identify the blockage point, and decide on precise support. For example, they can prepare five contacts together, listen to the formulations used, then measure what changes the following week.

If Leïla remains at nine but expands her account coverage, obtains internal recommendations, and converts more meetings into opportunities, it would be absurd to mechanically impose an additional meeting on her. The right decision might be to preserve her method, help her formalize it, and transmit it to the rest of the team.

The real work of the manager starts after the figure

Reading an indicator thus requires resisting two temptations. The first is to explain any variance too quickly by a lack of effort. The second is, conversely, to find a good reason for every insufficient result. Understanding is not excusing. Analyzing is not abandoning the requirement.

The manager's role is to transform a signal into a diagnosis, then a diagnosis into a decision. Depending on the situation, this decision may be to increase volume, review targeting, work on the pitch, help prioritize decisions, or conversely, make no modifications because the apparent decline is paving the way for better results.

This also distinguishes an activity review that pressures teams from one that makes them progress. In the former, the Business Manager comes to defend their figures. In the latter, they come to understand their activity and choose with their manager the next useful action.

Two organizations can follow exactly the same indicators, with the same objectives and dashboards. One rushes to correct variances. The other learns from them.

The difference is not visible on the dashboard. It is seen in the quality of the decisions that result.

The question to ask during the next review

The next time a Business Manager reports nine meetings for a target of ten, refrain from starting with: "How will you make up the missing one?"

Instead, start with: "What do these nine meetings tell us about your activity?"

The question is less comfortable. It requires more listening, distance, and managerial skill. But it finally allows the KPI to fulfill its true function: not to tell the manager what to think, but to show them where to look.

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