



REVENUE OPERATIONS & AI

# Salesforce control starts with what managers can observe

Salesforce control begins before the result: define observable work, outcome horizon, coaching use, and reward risk before reading a sales number.

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## MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

A sales result can be visible after the work that produced it is no longer easy to inspect. Cravens, Ingram, La-Forge, and Young study behavior-based and outcome-based control in 144 sales organizations and connect control with salesforce characteristics, performance dimensions, and sales-organization effectiveness. Their results imply a limited role for incentive compensation inside a wider control system. This article focuses on the observation-to-coaching boundary: what a manager can see, support, test, and later reward. It turns that boundary into a synthetic observability map, distinct from a commission recommendation, a private salesforce audit, or the broader control-blend article.

Keywords: Salesforce control · Behavior-based control · Outcome-based control · Sales management

A sales result can be visible after the work that produced it is no longer easy to inspect.

The short answer is that salesforce control starts with the observation boundary, not with the commission rate. A manager needs to know which behavior, information, or process can be reviewed and coached before treating an outcome as a complete description of selling work.

Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, and Young study behavior-based and outcome-based control in 144 sales organizations. They connect control with salesforce characteristics, performance dimensions, and sales-organization effectiveness. Their results imply a limited role for incentive compensation inside a wider control system and point to a blend of field sales management and compensation controls.

The evidence broadens in two directions. de Oliveira Santini et al. (2019) synthesize 104 studies and report that the relationships of behavior-based and outcome-based control vary with product complexity, market turbulence, financial performance, and innovation. Ghosh and John (2000) test compensation predictions across three experiments and show why incentive loading has to be read alongside effort-output uncertainty and agent risk aversion. The observation boundary therefore matters before the payment rule.

This article takes one narrower object from that evidence: what can be observed early enough to support management, and what remains too late, too noisy, or too incomplete to carry a reward signal.

# Why does salesforce control begin with observable behaviors rather than commercial results?

Revenue is an outcome. It may be important, but it arrives at the end of a process that includes work with different degrees of visibility. If a manager sees only the result, the control system cannot explain which behavior should be supported, which constraint changed, or which part of the result was outside the seller’s control.

Table 1 Why does salesforce control begin with observable behaviors rather than commercial results?

| Control object | Question                                                      | Risk if it is the only signal                    |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Behavior       | Which selling activity can be observed and coached?           | Activity is rewarded because it is easy to count |
| Information    | What did the seller know when the action was taken?           | Hindsight becomes performance judgment           |
| Process        | Which step, handoff, or decision preceded the result?         | A late outcome hides where the work failed       |
| Outcome        | What result occurred, on what horizon?                        | External conditions are assigned to the seller   |
| Effectiveness  | What did the control system improve for its declared purpose? | A number is treated as proof of control quality  |

Table from this essay. Sources and interpretation are given in the article.

The table is not a case description. It is a separation rule. An observable activity is not valuable merely because it is observable. A revenue outcome is not fully controllable merely because it is measurable. The management question is what each signal is permitted to do.

Figure 1 The salesforce observability map

| Control question     | Observable object                 | Coaching use                   | Outcome boundary                | Reward risk                     | Unresolved evidence                |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| What work happened?  | Declared selling behavior         | Review sequence and quality    | Behavior is not revenue         | Counting replaces judgment      | Is the behavior relevant?          |
| What was knowable?   | Information available at the time | Correct a process or handoff   | Hindsight is excluded           | Missing information is punished | Was the information usable?        |
| What result arrived? | Outcome and horizon               | Review conditions and response | External drivers remain visible | Outcome bears all blame         | Which drivers were controllable?   |
| What should change?  | Effectiveness purpose             | Adjust support or supervision  | Change is tested later          | Reward is changed first         | What evidence would disconfirm it? |

Author's synthetic framework grounded in Cravens, Ingram, LaForge and Young (1993), de Oliveira Santini et al. (2019), and Ghosh and John (2000). The rows are illustrative and do not describe a current salesforce scorecard.

The map does not create a scorecard. It asks whether the control question has been specified before a signal is used. If the purpose is coaching, the signal must arrive early enough to change the work. If the purpose is outcome accountability, the outcome and horizon must be clear. If the purpose is compensation, the calculation base and the seller's control boundary must be visible.

## What the 144-organization study contributes

Cravens and colleagues study relationships between behavior-based control, salesforce characteristics, different performance dimensions, and sales-organization effectiveness in 144 diverse sales organizations. The source tests a conceptual distinction between behavior-based and outcome-based control. Its contribution is not a rule that one side should replace the other.

The study's results imply a limited role for incentive compensation within a wider salesforce control system. They also suggest an appropriate blend of field sales management and compensation controls. The 104-study meta-analysis by de Oliveira Santini et al. (2019) reinforces the need to read behavior and outcome control conditionally rather than as rival universals. Ghosh and John (2000) add an incentive-design boundary: greater effort-output uncertainty can reduce the case for incentive-loaded pay when effort is nonverifiable and agents are risk averse. That language matters because a payment rule can signal an outcome without providing the information, coaching, support, or authority required to improve the process.

The source does not define an optimal observation metric for every sales job. It gives a reason to ask what the control system is trying to see. A complex sale, a short transaction, a new territory, and a renewal process may expose different behaviors and different lags between work and outcome. The study does not turn those examples into a portable benchmark.

## Observable does not mean controllable

The easiest activity to count is not necessarily the best activity to manage. A meeting, call, update, or stage change can be observable while its quality, timing, and relevance remain unknown. The opposite can also happen: a high-value act of judgement may be difficult to record even though it matters to the outcome.

The observation boundary should therefore include a reason for collecting each signal:

Table 3 Observable does not mean controllable

| Signal           | Permitted use                                | Question before escalation                     |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Activity count   | Check whether a declared process occurred    | Does the count capture quality or only volume? |
| Process evidence | Coach a step, handoff, or decision           | Can the manager see it before the outcome?     |
| Outcome result   | Review an agreed result on a named horizon   | Which external drivers remain in the frame?    |
| Exception record | Investigate a deviation or unusual condition | Is the exception evidence or an excuse?        |

Table from this essay. Sources and interpretation are given in the article.

This distinction protects both sides of the control system. A seller should not be held accountable for a driver the design has excluded. A manager should not call a behavior useful without testing whether it belongs to the intended process.

## Coaching and reward are different uses

The same signal can be suitable for coaching and unsuitable for pay. A process field may help a manager ask a better question while remaining too noisy, too easy to game, or too weakly connected to the result to determine compensation.

Conversely, an outcome can be a legitimate accountability object while being too late to guide day-to-day support. The control system needs both roles without pretending that one metric can do both jobs perfectly.

This is the observability boundary that distinguishes the article from a commission-plan discussion. A commission plan asks how pay changes with an outcome. An observation map asks what work can be seen and coached before the outcome is interpreted. The two questions can be connected, but one cannot substitute for the other.

## A synthetic observation-to-coaching sequence

Consider a synthetic selling process with a long decision horizon. A manager wants to improve the quality of early diagnosis, but the only recorded outcome is revenue at the end of the period.

The first step is not to add a stronger incentive. It is to define the early evidence: what diagnosis was recorded, which information was available, what decision followed, and how a manager could review it. The second step is

to declare the outcome horizon and the external conditions that remain in the frame. The third step is to test whether the observation predicts or explains a decision-relevant difference.

Only then can the organization ask whether the signal belongs in coaching, supervision, compensation, or none of them. The example is synthetic. It does not produce a valid behavior metric for a real salesforce.

## How should managers transition from behavior observation to targeted coaching?

Before a salesforce signal is used in a control decision, record:

- 1 the control purpose: coaching, supervision, accountability, compensation, or learning;
- 2 the behavior, information, process, or outcome being observed;
- 3 the timing of the observation relative to the decision and result;
- 4 the seller's authority and the external drivers in the outcome boundary;
- 5 the quality test for an activity signal;
- 6 the horizon and attribution rule for an outcome signal;
- 7 the evidence that would disconfirm the signal's usefulness;
- 8 the action the manager is allowed to take when the signal changes.

The final two fields are often absent. A signal becomes a control mechanism only when it changes what someone is allowed or expected to do. Otherwise it may be a dashboard field with no management purpose.

## Three claims to resist

First, do not say "if it is measurable, it is controllable." Measurement and controllability are different properties.

Second, do not say "activity metrics improve sales." An activity can be visible without being relevant, well timed, or connected to the intended outcome.

Third, do not say "the sales result tells us what the seller did." The result is an outcome with a horizon and an attribution boundary. It is not a complete observation plan.

For adjacent decisions, compare the compensation coverage problem with the salesforce-size response model, and review how the function without a German name separates sales steering from financial validation.

## Boundary

Cravens et al. provide a study of 144 sales organizations linking behavior-based control with salesforce characteristics, performance dimensions, and organizational effectiveness. de Oliveira Santini et al. add a 104-study meta-analytic boundary, and Ghosh and John add conditional experimental evidence about incentive loading and uncertainty. None provides a universal behavior metric or a current salesforce diagnosis. The observability map is an author-owned translation. It asks what can be observed early enough to coach, what arrives only as an outcome, and what evidence is still missing before either signal carries a stronger control claim.

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## END OF ESSAY

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