# Managing Distributed Pharmaceutical Field Teams: Practical Lessons on Visibility, Discipline, Incentives, and Managerial Intervention

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**Abstract**

This practice-based paper looks at a common problem in pharmaceutical field management: people with the same job title can work under very different conditions. In a large city, representatives may work near many colleagues and customers. In a remote city, a small team may cover a much wider area with less day-to-day visibility. Drawing on the author's management experience with geographically dispersed pharmaceutical sales teams, the paper discusses four practices that became important in that setting: regular field presence, different spans of control for compact and dispersed territories, diagnosis of weak performance before corrective action, and a tiered incentive system in which higher target realization led to higher bonus levels. During periods of field-force responsibility, the author aimed to spend about 10-12 days each month in the field. In dispersed territories, a regional manager could supervise roughly four field employees; in major cities, the number could rise to about twelve. These figures are examples from one operating setting, not proposed universal ratios. The paper argues that sales reports are most useful when managers also understand territory conditions, employee history, customer feedback, and what is happening in the field.
**Keywords:** pharmaceutical field force; sales management; field leadership; span of control; geographic dispersion; incentives; performance management

## 1. Introduction

Managing people in the field is different from managing people who work in one office. A field employee makes many daily decisions away from the manager. Distance makes that harder. When a team is spread across a large country, the manager cannot see every employee or every customer situation in the same way.

In my pharmaceutical management work, this difference was clear. A large-city team could have many employees working in the same commercial environment. In a remote city, three or four employees might cover a broad area. The job title could be the same, but the management problem was not.

Sales-force research has long separated control of outcomes from control of behavior (Anderson and Oliver, 1987). Territory characteristics and span of control have also been linked to differences in sales-force performance and role conditions (Ryans and Weinberg, 1979; Chonko, 1982). My experience led to a similar practical conclusion: the same performance standards can be kept without using the same supervision model everywhere.

This is a practice-based paper, not a survey or statistical study. It organizes lessons from managing distributed pharmaceutical field teams and relates them to established sales-management research.

## 2. Practice Basis

The observations here come from management practice rather than a formal research project. They should be read as experience-based lessons, not as causal findings.

One habit shaped much of my approach. I tried to spend about 10-12 days each month in the field. These visits were not only inspections. They helped me see problems early, understand why a result was moving in the wrong direction, and notice practices that were working well.

Reports answered some questions. Field visits answered others. A report could show that a territory was below target. Time in the field could help reveal whether the problem involved customer access, weak execution, loss of motivation, planning, or the way a manager was working with the team.

Coaching research in a pharmaceutical sales organization also shows why the quality of managerial contact matters. Dahling et al. (2016) studied 1,246 sales representatives in 136 teams and found that coaching skill was related to sales goal attainment. Their results also showed that frequent coaching was not automatically helpful when coaching skill was low.

## 3. Visibility Changes with the Territory

The amount of natural visibility in a field team changes from one territory to another. In a large city, 20 or 30 employees may work in overlapping areas. They see colleagues during the day, visit some of the same customers, and operate within a relatively compact geography. That creates some informal visibility even when the regional manager is not physically present.

In that setting, an employee who repeatedly stopped working during field hours had a greater chance of being seen by colleagues. I did not use colleagues as a formal monitoring system. The point is simply that behavior is less hidden when many people from the same organization work in the same area.

Remote territories were different. A city might have only three or four employees, and they could cover a large area. Informal visibility was much lower. For those positions, I placed more weight on reliability, regular working habits, and self-discipline when hiring. I wanted people who could be trusted to work consistently without someone nearby all day.

This changed the question I asked about supervision. Instead of asking only how many employees one manager could handle, I also asked how difficult it would be for that manager to understand what was happening across the territory.

## 4. Span of Control Was Not the Same Everywhere

In dispersed territories, a regional manager could be responsible for roughly four field employees. In major cities, where the structure was more compact, the number could rise to about twelve. These numbers describe one operating setting. They are not proposed as ideal ratios for other companies.

The difference came from the work itself. Four employees spread over a large area can require more managerial time than a larger team working in one city. Travel takes longer, joint field visits are harder to arrange, and problems can remain unseen for longer.

Ryans and Weinberg (1979) found that territory characteristics and span of control were among the factors explaining variation in salesperson performance. Chonko (1982) examined span of control in relation to role conflict and role ambiguity. These studies do not provide a universal staffing ratio, but they support treating span of control as a management-design question rather than a simple head-count rule.

For a distributed organization, I would keep common performance standards but allow the management structure to reflect geography.

## 5. A Low Result Is Not Yet a Diagnosis

When an employee's performance weakened, I first looked at previous sales and the direction of the trend. I wanted to know whether this was a person who had always struggled or a previously successful employee whose results had recently changed.

That led to practical questions. Had we changed something that discouraged a good employee? What support had we provided? How had the employee responded? Was there visible effort to improve? Or had the same problem continued despite repeated opportunities?

This did not remove accountability. A manager still has to act when performance remains weak. But the current number should not erase the employee's history or the conditions around the result.

Anderson and Oliver's (1987) distinction between outcome-based and behavior-based sales-force control is useful here. In practice, I needed both. Results showed me where attention was needed. Observation and discussion helped me decide what kind of intervention made sense.

## 6. Incentives: Make the Next Level Worth Reaching

Compensation was another part of the system. We used a tiered incentive structure. As target realization increased, the bonus level increased as well. Better realization opened a more attractive reward level.

The purpose was simple: additional performance had to feel worthwhile to the employee. When the reward for reaching the next level became more visible, many employees had a stronger reason to continue pushing after reaching an intermediate level.

Research supports the idea that bonus design can affect sales effort. Chung, Steenburgh, and Sudhir (2014) found that bonuses enhanced productivity and that overachievement commissions helped sustain the productivity of strong performers after quota attainment.

I would not treat incentives as a complete management system. Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer (2012) warn against relying too heavily on short-term individual incentives and argue for a more balanced sales-force system. That matches my experience. A larger bonus cannot repair weak customer relationships, poor coaching, or a badly managed territory.

## 7. Listening Was Part of Control

We also increased the frequency of meetings with customers. The purpose was practical: listen, understand what was changing, and decide what needed to be adjusted. I applied the same principle inside the field organization.

One of the biggest mistakes a manager can make is to stop listening to employees and to the field. Numbers are necessary, especially in a large organization, but they compress many different situations into a few measures. A sales decline can have several causes. A strong result can also hide weak practices that may become a problem later.

Listening does not mean accepting every explanation. It means adding another source of information. I preferred to compare what the numbers showed, what the regional manager said, what the employee said, what customers were saying, and what I could observe directly.

I also adjusted my approach to regional managers. I considered the manager's capacity, personality, and skills when deciding how much structure, follow-up, or autonomy was appropriate. The expected result remained important, but the route to that result could differ.

## 8. A Practical Field-Management Check

Before deciding how closely a territory should be managed, I would look at five things: how dispersed the territory is; how visible daily work is; what the employee's performance history shows; what support has already been provided and how the employee responded; and whether the incentive system gives employees a meaningful reason to reach the next performance level.

These points are not a scoring model. They are a way to avoid treating head count, sales results, and geography as separate issues when they affect one another in daily field management.

## 9. Discussion

The main lesson from this experience is that consistency and uniformity are not the same thing. A company can apply the same ethical standards, performance expectations, and accountability rules while managing territories differently.

This matters when senior leaders are far from the field. Adding more reports can improve visibility, but it cannot remove the need for judgment. Someone still has to decide whether a problem is temporary or persistent, whether it comes mainly from the employee or the territory, and whether the response should be coaching, closer follow-up, a change in incentives, or a more serious performance action.

The research discussed in this paper points in the same general direction. Territory conditions, control systems, coaching quality, and compensation design can all influence sales-force outcomes (Ryans and Weinberg, 1979; Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Dahling et al., 2016; Chung et al., 2014). The practical point I would add is that managerial visibility should fit the territory.

For me, field presence was the way to keep that visibility. Spending 10-12 days a month in the field is not presented here as a benchmark. It was the practice that allowed me to compare reports with what I saw and heard directly.

## 10. Limitations

This paper is based on management experience rather than a formally designed empirical study. It does not test whether the practices described caused particular sales outcomes. The manager-to-employee ratios are examples from one operating context and should not be treated as universal recommendations.

The observations also come from pharmaceutical field organizations working under specific geographic and organizational conditions. Other markets may have different customer-access rules, travel patterns, digital monitoring systems, labor practices, or sales models.

A useful next step would be a formal comparison of compact and dispersed territories. Such research could examine whether geographic dispersion changes the relationship between span of control, coaching time, employee autonomy, and performance.

## 11. Conclusion

A distributed field organization cannot be managed well from sales reports alone. Managers need enough contact with the field to understand what sits behind the numbers.

In my experience, that meant regular field visits, smaller management spans where geography made supervision difficult, careful selection of self-disciplined employees for low-visibility territories, attention to performance history before intervention, and a tiered incentive system that made higher realization more rewarding.

The principle I would keep is simple: listen to the field before assuming that the report tells the whole story. Good field management is not constant control. It is being close enough to know when control, coaching, support, or a change in direction is actually needed.

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