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A review of sales leadership

Leslie C. Gray
San Jose State University

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A REVIEW OF SALES LEADERSHIP

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Psychology

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Leslie C. Gray

May 2001

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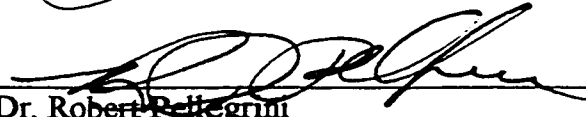
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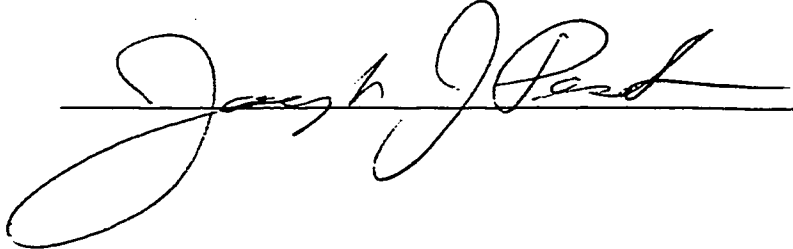


Dr. Robert Pellegrini



Dr. Maynard Goff, Personnel Decisions International, Corp.

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ABSTRACT

A REVIEW OF SALES LEADERSHIP

By Leslie C. Gray

What does it take to be a successful sales leader? In addition to meeting sales quotas, sales management requires leaders to foster the success of others. Various experts in the sales field propose a number of leadership skills that are critical to sales manager performance. However there is little empirical evidence to support these findings. The purpose of this project is to explore key skills identified for sales management and understand how they relate to overall performance. Archival data was used from a multi-rater feedback instrument for managers. The results confirmed some of the key managerial skills that are commonly thought to be important for sales manager performance. The project also noted interesting findings regarding what bosses say is important for sales manager performance, and what skills they actually consider in judging overall performance.

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A Review of Sales Leadership

Leslie C. Gray

San Jose State University

Abstract

What does it take to be a successful sales leader? In addition to meeting sales quotas, sales management requires leaders to foster the success of others. Various experts in the sales field propose a number of leadership skills that are critical to sales manager performance. However there is little empirical evidence to support these findings. The purpose of this project is to explore key skills identified for sales management and understand how they relate to overall performance. Archival data was used from a multi-rater feedback instrument for managers. The results confirmed some of the key managerial skills that are commonly thought to be important for sales manager performance. The project also noted interesting findings regarding what bosses say is important for sales manager performance, and what skills they actually consider in judging overall performance.

A Review of Sales Leadership

Effective leadership has long been considered by many in the business sector as a critical contributor to organizational success. As the effort to enhance managerial effectiveness continues, experts seek to understand the importance of key leadership behaviors (Doody, 2000). In looking at ways to improve bottom-line performance, experts in the sales field (seasoned sales professionals and performance consultants) have suggested that certain behaviors are key for effective sales management (Alonzo, 1998; Beveridge, 1981; Srikonka, 1991; Strout, 2001). Behavioral leadership theories also suggest that certain behaviors are more critical for effective leadership performance than others. This project will attempt to verify some of the common managerial behaviors thought to be important for sales management, by considering behavioral leadership theory and using multi-rater data on sales manager performance.

While there is some debate about the degree to which sales managers impact sales representative success (Rosenbaum, 2001), it is clear that they do play a role in their direct report's performance (Dubinsky, 1999). In fact, a lack of management support has been said to be a key factor in the under-performance or failure of sales representatives (Alonzo, 1998; Dubinsky, 1999). Companies are finding that one reason for poor sales management is a lack in leadership skills, and some of their practices may be exacerbating this problem.

To begin with, quantitative measures are usually the primary focus in evaluating salespeople. As a result, sales managers are often selected less for their leadership skills, than for their selling capabilities (Srikonda, 1999). Consequently, star sellers are rewarded with the responsibility of managing their peers (Birkner, 2000). But automatically encouraging top performers to advance to management may not be a wise approach to sales succession (Strout, 2001). Companies have found that the best salespeople do not necessarily make the best sales managers (Birkner, 2000; Strout, 2001). In fact, it has been suggested that many top sellers possess characteristics that are less successful in a more team-oriented role (Birkner, 2000; Strout 2001).

In addition to selecting managers based on sales performance, companies have also neglected to provide adequate training for new managers (Lorge, 1999). As a result, they are unprepared to handle certain managerial responsibilities (Birkner, 2000). To increase the effectiveness of sales managers, companies must make greater efforts to understand and focus on what is truly required to be a successful leader in their sales environment.

A behavioral study of leadership

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore leadership effectiveness in work settings. Behavior-based theories of leadership focus on the behavioral differences that leaders exhibit, under the assumption that what leaders 'do' distinguishes their effectiveness opposed to the inherent traits they possess. These studies generally involve extensive observation and survey research to create leadership profiles. Leaders are then

evaluated and other organizational factors are considered to identify behaviors that contribute to successful leadership performance (Landy, 1989).

Early behavioral research known as the Ohio State studies (Likert, 1961; Stodgill, 1974) pinpoints two basic dimensions of leadership behavior. One aspect addresses the interpersonal or people-oriented side of managing others, the other speaks to the more task-related behaviors of leadership required to get the job done. In these studies, leaders who are highly focused on results are referred to as being high on the 'initiating structure' dimension, compared to those having a high affinity for the interpersonal side of leadership, which is referred to as the 'consideration' dimension. The structure dimension includes behaviors where managers organize and define activities and their relations to the group such as: clarifying roles, assigning responsibilities, communicating expectations, and planning and driving results. The consideration dimension involves behaviors that indicate mutual trust and respect for others, such as: generating rapport with direct reports, involving others in decisions, and fostering opening dialogue.

Each dimension has its benefits and shortcomings (Bass, 1981). To the credit of people-oriented leaders, they are likely concerned with morale and fostering a positive work environment, however they may not take a direct approach in achieving results or addressing tough issues. Whereas, leadership styles that are highly production-oriented may get results, but experience difficulty keeping good people because they do not attend to their needs. Leaders who have strengths in both of these areas may be most effective (Blake & Mouton, 1985); that is, a leader who gets results and attends to interpersonal

issues of management as well. The challenge for leaders is to adapt their style to the circumstances.

Observations of sales leadership

On the job, business professionals and experienced sales leaders have proposed common theories about what behaviors are required for successful sales manager performance (Alonzo, 1998). Three behaviors that are commonly mentioned are coaching others, maintaining open communication, and motivating others.

Business challenges have caused companies to consider the increased role that sales managers must play in the coaching and development of their sales staff. (Birkner, 2000). In fact, many business professionals assert that coaching salespeople is or should be the top priorities for sales managers (Beveridge, 1999; Sanchez, 1998). Some people in the sales field claim that the best coaching occurs when representatives are actually handling sales calls, noting that making joint calls is critical for a sales representative's personal growth. The role of the manager during joint calls is to model behavior or give the seller helpful feedback after the interaction (Sitkins, 2001). Sellers can either observe positive selling behaviors, or get timely feedback on their ability to handle client engagements. A number of companies have reduced selling responsibilities for managers to decrease competition between them and their staff, and to allow them more time to focus on developing their direct reports (Srikonda, 1999). Managers who make coaching a top priority try to achieve success through their people (Birkner, 2000; Srikonda, 1999).

Open communication is another behavior that is emphasized for effective sales leadership. Sharing information and updates is key to ensuring sales representatives have the data they need to be successful on the job, as well as providing them with helpful advice and feedback (Birkner, 2000). Communication between sales managers and their direct reports needs to be open, honest, and regular (Birkner, 2000; Cholewka, 2001). Some companies use communication skills as a criteria when promoting representatives, looking for behaviors such as: the willingness to share information with colleagues, teaching others, and sharing best practices (Strout, 2001). Managing sales staff remotely can pose challenges in efforts to monitor progress against goals (DeLapa, 2000). This is a common obstacle in sales management that calls for increased communications between sales managers and direct reports. Communication is known to be so critical to sales functions, that it is not looked at as event. Instead several executives consider communication to be a management strategy (Birkner, 2000).

While the salespeople are often highly driven, self-motivated individuals, managers note that they still need to know how to inspire them to achieve goals (Birkner, 2000). There are various sales publications that outline tips and prescribe best practices to establish reward systems and other methods to encourage salespeople to excel (Srikonda, 1989). Some methods include bonuses, contests, increasing commission rates depending on performance levels, and providing team as well as individual incentives. Managers frequently make efforts to promote competition between sales representatives to enhance their performance (Sitkins, 2001). Seasoned professionals suggest that sales

managers must take time to identify what motivates their sales people, keeping in mind that different people have different sources of motivation. Being able to maintain productivity during slow or stressful times can be especially difficult, but is critical to sustain business performance. Consequently, leaders in the sales arena assert that finding ways to tap into the motivations of sales staff is a key skill for sales managers (Alonzo, 1998; Birkner, 2000; Simonsen, 1997).

Current project

Experts and professionals that deal with the sales function propose that certain skills are important for effective sales management performance, but in practice are these same skills taken into account when considering the overall performance of sale managers? There is some evidence that skills identified as critical for leadership performance, are not necessarily considered when bosses rate overall performance (Robie et al., 2000). If these managerial sales skills are truly critical for successful sales management performance, and are widely perceived as such across various industries, then an emphasize on these skills would be expected when reviewing assessments of managerial performance.

Method

Participants

The total sample size of sales managers was 4,645. Smaller sample sizes are attributed to missing data. The average age of participants was 39 years. The majority of the sample consisted of males 72.6% ($n=3372$) and 27% of the participants were female

($n=1255$). The ethnic breakdown of participants is as follows 3% African American ($n=141$), .2% Native American ($n=7$), 2.8% Hispanic ($n=131$), 83% Caucasian ($n=3,864$), 1.6% Other ($n=72$). In addition, 25% of the managers were in their position for less than a year ($n=1,160$), 59% from 1-5 years ($n=2,740$), 15% were in their positions for 6 years or longer ($n=738$). Regarding levels of sales management, 27% were high-level executives ($n=1245$), 34% were mid-level managers ($n=1,588$), 36% identified themselves as first line managers ($n=1,698$), and 1.6% were non-management professionals ($n=76$).

Materials

The PROFILOR® is a 360-degree (multi-rater) feedback instrument, designed by Personnel Decision International (Hezlett et al., 1997) to provide managers behavioral feedback on their leadership performance. The instrument consists of 130 managerial behaviors. These behaviors are grouped into 24 management skills and organized in 8 broader factors or competencies as they are sometimes referred to. This project focused on the 24 skill dimensions. Item development was based on several decades of consulting experience, literature research, job analysis, job performance models, and interviews with hundreds of supervisors and managers from various industries (Hezlett et al., 1995).

Procedures

The data under review is archival 360-degree feedback data for sales managers gathered over a course of a nine-year period. When the managers participated in the

PROFILOR® process, they completed a self-questionnaire and questionnaires were also distributed their bosses, peers, and direct reports to get feedback from multiple perspectives. The boss ratings were focused on for the purpose of this project.

Importance Ratings

The first part of the PROFILOR® instrument requires participants and their bosses to rate the importance of each of the 24 managerial skills to the participant's job using a 7 point scale where 1 and 2 = important; 3,4, or 5 = very important, and 6 or 7 = critically important. Using a forced distribution, raters are instructed to have no more than eight skills in each distribution. It's important to note that this is not a measure of performance, but merely a way to gauge how important each skill is for the participant's job. This project only focuses on the boss ratings for our analysis.

Skills Rating

The 130 behaviors are randomized for administration.. All raters provide performance ratings on how well the participant performs each behavior using a scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very great extent.

Overall Performance Ratings

The PROFILOR® also provides information on three managerial outcomes, which are derived using boss ratings. This project only focused on one of these, which is a 5 item measure of overall performance and is intended to provide managers with a broad view of how well they are performing on the job from the boss perspective. Higher ratings on this measure indicate better performance. A sample of an item included in this

measure is “Are an effective manager overall”. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of this scale is .78.

Analyses

Two sets of analysis will be conducted to assess which of the 24 leadership skills are critical for sales manager performance. The first analysis will assess the explicit (declared) importance of the skills according to the boss, and the other will assess implicit (observed) importance of the skills in regards to the measure of overall performance.

Explicit importance analysis

The first analysis of explicit importance provides information as to what bosses declare to be important for participant (sales manager) performance. It is the average of boss importance ratings of each managerial skill for sales managers (n=4,023).

Implicit importance analysis

The second analysis of implicit (observed) importance shows what managerial skills the bosses actually consider when rating overall performance for sales managers (n=4,287). Standard methods of multiple regression will not be used due to the high interrelatedness of the PROFILOR® items. Instead, to assess the observed importance of each skill, this project will use a new method of regression analysis developed by Johnson (2000) that estimates the proportion of R^2 attributable to each predictor. As a result, the data captures what factors are important influences on judgements, in this case the relative contribution of each skill in predicting overall performance. Together, these

analyses enable the examination of how perceptions of certain skills measured by the multi-rater instrument influence judgments on overall performance.

Results

Table 1 shows rankings of declared and observed importance, 1=the most important and 24 =the lowest of importance. Among the top five skills that were observed to be important by bosses were: drive for results, motivate others, act with integrity, coach and develop, and manage execution. The top five skills that had the most influence on overall performance were: drive for results, show work commitment, act with integrity, use sound judgment, and lead courageously. Drive for results was not only perceived to be the most critical skill for the sales manager function ($M=5.96$) according to boss ratings, but was also the number one skill considered in ratings of overall performance ($r=8.4\%$) for this group of sales managers ($n=4,287$). Similarly, act with integrity was observed to be a critical skill ($M=5.42$) and was highly considered in rating overall performance ($r=7\%$). The observed rankings for several of the interpersonal type skills tended to be consistently lower than their declared ranking. This theme is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 1 Declared and Observed Rankings

Managerial Skill/Dimension	Declared (Explicit) Rank	Observed (Implicit) Rank
Drive for Results	1	1
Motivate Others	2	15
Act with Integrity	3	3
Coach and Develop	4	12
Manage Execution	5	8
Provide Direction	6	11
Use Sound Judgment	7	7
Foster Teamwork	8	19
Establish Plans	9	6
Show Work Commitment	10	2
Analyze Issues	11	10
Know The Business	12	17
Lead Courageously	13	13
Influence Others	14	9
Foster Open Communication	15	16
Build Relationships	16	20
Demonstrate Adaptability	17	18
Listen to Others	18	22
Champion Change	19	13
Speak Effectively	20	21
Display Organizational Savvy	21	23
Develop Oneself	22	14
Manage Disagreements	23	24
Use Technical/Functional Knowledge	24	7

Table 2 Task vs. Interpersonal Rankings

Managerial Skill/Dimension	Declared (Explicit) Rank	Observed (Implicit) Rank
<u>Task-Oriented Dimensions</u>		
Drive for Results	1	1
Establish Plans	23	6
Manage Execution	5	8
Provide Direction	6	11
Show Work Commitment	10	2
Use Technical/Functional Knowledge	24	7
<u>Interpersonal Dimensions</u>		
Build Relationships	16	20
Coach and Develop Others	4	12
Foster Teamwork	8	19
Motivate Others	2	15
Foster Open Communication	15	16
Listen to Others	18	22

Discussion

The primary purpose of this project was to explore the importance of certain leadership skills for sales management performance. In doing so, some of the key skills commonly noted to be critical sales manager performance were confirmed. Based on the observations and experiences of sales experts this project focused on three skills found to be critical for sales management, which were: coaching, communication, and motivation. Several behavioral models were also considered to provide a broader of understanding of effective leadership.

Summary and implications of findings

The results found some similarities between the key managerial skills for sales managers identified by sales experts in the field and the boss importance ratings from the multi-rater data. Two of the key skills, coaching and motivating others, identified for sales managers in the industry (Brikner, 2000; Beveridge, 1999; Srikonda, 1989) were also within the top five skill sets declared important in our findings. This confirms that these two skill sets are considered critically important for sales management across a number of industries. However, these skills were not highly considered in boss ratings of overall performance for sales managers. These findings suggest that differences sometimes exist between the skills people say are important, compared to the skills that actually contribute to rating overall performance.

Results also indicate some support for behavioral research studies on leadership. Drive for Results was found to be the most critical skill for sales managers and it was

also the most highly weighted skill in ratings of overall performance. This finding is consistent with several of the behavior theories that indicate certain task driven skills are an important component for leader effectiveness (Likert, 1961). In addition, several other task/production-oriented skills (show work commitment, lead courageously, establish plans) were heavily weighted in manager performance ratings.

The people-oriented type skills did not have the same kind of representation in the results. Although sales experts suggest open communication skills are a critical factor for managing sales representatives (Birkner, 2000; Strout; 2001), communication skills (foster open communication and listen to others) were not declared as critical skills or highly factored into overall performance ratings for sales managers. This does not mean that communication and other interpersonal skills are not important, but rather it may not be as widely thought of as critical in relation to other managerial skills. Consequently, executives may acknowledge soft-skills to be important, however they may still be focusing primarily on task-oriented behaviors when evaluating performance.

The following inconsistencies have broader implications for how companies manage the performance of sales managers (as well as any other function). A lack of alignment between what is emphasized versus what is truly important for performance can cause individuals to focus on the wrong priorities. For example, if executives are trying to get sales managers to adopt more people-oriented or considerate leadership styles, they can end up sending mixed messages by evaluating or rewording the managers primarily for the more task-oriented aspects of leadership. As a result, sales managers

will likely continue to focus on the things that get them results, without expanding other key leadership capabilities. Consequently, companies may want to put forth the appropriate effort to ensure they are setting the appropriate expectations and priorities for their sales leaders. In doing so, they may want to work with Human Resource or Organizational Development specialists to ensure they understand the key skills-sets or competencies to help drive sales leadership succession and development initiatives.

Strengths and Weaknesses

One strength of this project was the data sample that was used. The large sample size ($n=4,645$) helps make the analysis more robust and less subject to extreme values, enabling us to make meaningful generalizations. The sample population includes representation of sales managers from various industries, which allows for inferences about managerial skills across different types of companies. The sample further included the representation of a number of ethnic groups. Having information about the participants' managerial roles also allows for generalizations across different levels of managerial experience.

The high predictability ($R^2=.77$) of the overall performance measure for sales manager performance is a clear strength of the multi-rater instrument. This suggests that the measure does a fairly good job at predicting overall performance within the sales manager function. Another statistical advantage is the use of Johnson's (2000) regression equation, which provides an understanding of implicit importance by assessing how each managerial skill is independently related to overall performance.

Among the project's limitations, the boss ratings are the only perspective considered in defining critical skills for manager performance. While the boss perspective generally tends to have the most impact in defining performance expectations and evaluations, it is still only one part of the equation in understanding job performance. Further research on different groups can yield useful information regarding what is required for sales manager performance. It would be especially helpful to examine comparisons with direct report data. In addition, there is no information collected regarding why managers identify certain skills to be more critical than others. Gaining a better understanding of the rationale behind ratings could help verify boss importance ratings.

Suggestions for future research

For the purposes of this project, effective leadership was operationalized by using boss ratings for importance and overall performance. In continuing the examination of sales leadership, it would be helpful for other projects or studies to include different perspectives in order to better understand how the perceptions may differ. It would be especially helpful to understand what sales representatives view as important for their manager's performance. As mentioned previously, the boss perspective, while significant, is still only one opinion of the several groups of people a sales manager may interact with on a day-to-day basis

Conclusion

This review of sales leadership is preliminary and is not intended to be a comprehensive study of sales leadership performance. The results should be used to contribute to the understanding of the key leadership behaviors for sales managers. Further studies are required to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how other's interpret effective sales manager performance.

In summary, the findings have found that while certain managerial skills are commonly viewed as critical for effective sales leadership, many of these skills are not of primary focus in rating the overall performance of sales managers. The implications from this research and studies like it can play a role in the on going development and performance management efforts for sales leaders.

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APPENDIX A

**Office of the Academic
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**Associate Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research**

One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0025
Voice: 408-283-7500
Fax: 408-924-2477
E-mail: gstudies@wahoo.sjsu.edu
<http://www.sjsu.edu>

To: Leslie Gray
12959 Brigham Drive
Austin, TX 78732

From: Nabil Ibrahim, 
AVP, Graduate Studies & Research

Date: April 9, 2001

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request for exemption from human subject's review under category "B" in the study entitled:

"Sales Manager Leadership."

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project or the subject's data collected for the research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, unless they are serving as a primary source, and with regard to any and all data that may be collected from the subjects. The Board's approval includes continued monitoring of your research to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Nabil Ibrahim, Ph.D., immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma and release of potentially damaging personal information.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted. This approval is granted for a one-year period and data collection beyond April 8, 2002 requires an extension request.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2480.

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