Is it better to be both nice and nasty? Investigating the co-occurrence of sales manager aggressiveness and caring

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Problem resolution styles
Sales manager's aggressiveness
Sales manager's caring

ABSTRACT

Empirical research has largely neglected to investigate the issue of sales manager’s problem resolution styles in handling conflicts. Building on the qualitative work of Lee and Cadogan (2009), we investigate how sales manager’s problem resolution styles, as reflected in both caring and aggressive interpersonal interactions with their salespeople, impact important sales force outcomes. The results show that depending on the level of caring that manager exhibits during the problem resolution process, the curvilinear effects of aggressiveness on salespeople emotional exhaustion and sportsmanship are dramatically altered. Our findings are interesting, and suggest that the almost wholly negative picture painted in current academic literature regarding aggressive managerial style is at least somewhat simplistic, and perhaps rather overstated. Therefore aggressiveness and caring further should be considered together, rather than separately.

1. Introduction

‘...nice [managers] can actually finish first, as long as they use the right strategies that prevent others from taking advantage of them.’ (Seppala, 2014, Emphasis added).

‘...to build a good leader, you perhaps have to build on a foundation of “bad” qualities—that classic nasty competitive streak... that lets them get things done’ (Asghar, 2014, Emphasis added).

It is common in the business press to see managers being portrayed at turns in either a positive manner as being “nice”, or in a negative manner as being “nasty”, to their subordinate employees. Case studies in the business press present contrasting pictures of effectiveness in this regard, and there is little consensus regarding which is most effective for a manager. Indeed, both types of manager have been portrayed as effective by commentators (Asghar, 2014; Seppala, 2014). Scholars too echo the business press by portraying managers’ supervisory styles either as positive or negative, although here the picture is rather more favorable towards positive managers. Research investigating positive supervisory styles highlights the caring nature of managers (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), showing that caring managers have a positive effect on job satisfaction, positive mood, and reduced stress of employees. Research investigating negative supervisory styles mainly focuses on workplace aggression (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). Such work finds no benefit in what the business press would call ‘nasty’ management, suggesting that aggression is associated with a plethora of negative outcomes, including poor employee performance (Peng, Schaubroeck, & Li, 2014), deviant work-related behavior (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007) and increased employee turnover (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002).

While both positive and negative portrayals of managers have separately found ready acceptance within academic circles, spawning large amounts of research, the effects of joint occurrences of positive and negative supervision styles have received almost no academic interest. Indeed, it is unlikely that these managerial styles always operate in total isolation of one another (e.g. Seppala, 2014), and therefore investigations based solely on investigating either a positive or negative supervision style of managers may be ineffective at best, and counter-productive at worst. In the present study, we examine the interplay of these two styles on employee consequences.

In doing so, we draw on the concept of sales manager problem resolution styles (Lee & Cadogan, 2009) to argue that negative (aggressive) and positive (caring) problem resolution styles (hereinafter PRSs) are best thought of as together determining the consequences of employee wellbeing. In particular, we place our investigation within the area of sales manager – salespeople interaction. By the boundary spanning nature of their job, salespeople are particularly directed towards their

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.05.018
Received 22 November 2016; Received in revised form 16 March 2017; Accepted 17 May 2017

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sales managers as their single most important contact with the organization. Sales managers are responsible for supporting the ability of salespeople to do their job. This creates a massive burden on the sales manager, who must resolve salespeople related issues to alleviate underperformance among salespeople, and provide guidance to support salespeople, or even sanction unacceptable behavior (Lee & Cadogan, 2009). In the present paper, we address these managerial challenges by answering the following question: What is the simultaneous impact of caring and aggressive problem resolution styles on employee outcomes?

This paper contributes to both theory and practice by providing evidence of the simultaneous existence and importance of both positive and negative sales manager PRSs on key sales force consequences. In theoretical terms, we add to the management and sales literature in several ways. One contribution of this research is the overt academic recognition of an area of sales management—problem resolution—which, although seemingly important on a practical level, appears to have received little attention by sales scholars. Past academic studies on the various problems salespeople may cause, can be classified into organizational control literature, vertical-exchange theory and transactional leadership. These studies provide implicit recommendations for managerial response to problem situations, but do not systematically examine how sales managers can actually implement the recommended behaviors when dealing with problem situations. The present study provides the first empirical testing of how sales managers actually go about implementing behaviors designed to resolve problems (Lee & Cadogan, 2009).

Second, the study contributes to the evolving discourse on sales, by providing support for construct interrelations previously proposed in the literature (i.e. sales manager's aggressiveness and caring problem resolution style) but that have remained relatively unnoticed throughout the evolution of scholarly sales research. Further, by acknowledging the simultaneous presence of "nasty" and "nice" managerial PRSs we acknowledge the co-existence of a variety of managerial behaviors and as such capture a more realistic picture of managers’ supervision styles.

Finally, we argue and show that salespeople job satisfaction, can be influenced by both internal emotional states (i.e. emotional exhaustion) and outward behavioral expressions (i.e. sportsmanship), both being consequence of perceived PRS used from sales manager. In doing so, our results provide the first indications of exactly how the interplay between two sales manager PRS influences both the emotional exhaustion of salespeople, and their sportsmanship. Results indicate that depending on the level of caring that managers exhibit during the problem resolution process, the effects of aggressiveness on salespeople emotional exhaustion are altered. Similarly, we also find that, depending on the level of caring that managers exhibit during the problem resolution process, the effects of aggressiveness on salespeople sportsmanship are also altered. This is further evidence of the importance of accounting for the simultaneous existence and influence of a variety of managerial styles on employee outcomes such as job satisfaction. In this sense, our results also provide a significant contribution to management research in general, beyond the sales context. Specifically, to our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the simultaneous effects of positive (caring) and negative (aggression) PRSs. In doing so we provide a welcome counterpoint to existing studies, which may paint an overly simplistic picture of real managerial life. Here, we show that managers should not be thought of as either nasty or nice, but rather a little of both.

In managerial terms, we offer important implications for sales managers in particular, and managers in general. The question of how managers can best resolve day-to-day problems is an important and relevant one. Currently, the advice for sales managers is uni-dimensional, taking either the "good" manager route or the "bad" route. Indeed, most scholarly research pushes managers down the 'good' route, and definitely away from aggressiveness (e.g. Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Vogel et al., 2015). However, our model acknowledges the presence of both styles, and suggests that they jointly affect key outcomes. As a result, this study takes a fresh perspective for sales managers, offering more fine-grained recommendations with regards to potential benefits and drawbacks of combining aggressiveness with a caring PRS. In fact, our results show that medium-level of aggressiveness, combined with a high-level of caring may actually be the optimal combination.

2. Sales manager’s problem resolution styles in interactions with salespeople

Recent literature suggests that a substantial proportion of the sales manager's daily time is taken up with dealing with specific 'problem situations' involving the sales force (Rapp, 2012). Dealing with these situations is likely to have various intentions, such as preventing poor performance, raising performance to new heights, or dealing with the exhibition of inappropriate behavior (e.g. unethical selling behavior, or inappropriate social behavior). While few studies explicitly recognize these situations, various fields of literature (e.g. organizational control literature, vertical-exchange theory, transactional leadership theory) appear to offer some guidance in how sales managers may respond to these problem situations. Nevertheless, studies in the above-mentioned fields deal with the issue of problem resolution only by implication, and are focused primarily on the behavioral options which are open to the sales manager to respond to problem situations. However, some aspects remain untouched by the literature. In particular, what is missing from the sales literature so far is an appreciation of how sales managers actually go about implementing the behaviors recommended by various theories, or in other words, what could be called sales manager PRS. Apart from anecdotal evidence advocating the importance of sales manager’s delivery methods for sales people’s performance (e.g. Oechsli, 1993) and a single qualitative study on sales manager PRS (Lee & Cadogan, 2009) academic literature remains silent on consequences of various PRSs.

In theoretical terms, sales manager PRSs can be broadly conceptualized as the ways in which sales managers implement their interactions with salespeople when dealing with problem situations (e.g. general performance improvement, or responding to talent loss). Using the concept of sales manager problem resolution styles (SMAPRS), we can classify these interactions into different categories. In this study, we focus on two previously-identified but under-explored aspects underpinning salesperson–manager interactions within problem resolution situations (Lee & Cadogan, 2009), sales manager’s aggressiveness (SMAag) and sales manager's caring (SMAca).

2.1. Sales manager’s aggressive and caring problem resolution styles

2.1.1. Sales manager aggressive problem resolution style (SMAag)

The past two decades have witnessed an increase in academic interest in the topic of workplace aggression. The number of terms, proposed constructs and approaches to the issue have followed this trend as well (for a comprehensive list please see Hershcovich & Reich, 2013). In broad terms workplace aggression denotes premeditated and hostile work-related negative acts by the individual in a position of power over the intended target that cause injury and harm to the target of such aggression (Burton, Hoobler, & Scheu, 2012; Neuman & Baron, 2005).

However, it seems plausible to suggest that some actions may be seen as aggressive by the observers and recipients of such actions, while not necessarily having harmful intentions from the sender. Such 'aggressiveness' may drive potential negative consequences, regardless of the actual intention. Thus, focusing on the premeditated intentions (as most of the current workplace aggression concepts assume) does not fully capture the essence of aggression in general. It seems likely that in a real-world sales force context, sales managers may utilize hostile styles only occasionally (for example when under duress), rather than
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