



Organizational variables, sales force perceptions of readiness for change, learning, and performance among boundary-spanning teams: A conceptual framework and propositions for research

Deva Rangarajan^{a,*}, Lawrence B. Chonko^{b,1}, Eli Jones^{a,2}, James A. Roberts^{b,3}

^aDepartment of Marketing, C.T. Bauer College of Business, University of Houston, 4800 Calhoun, Houston, TX 77204, USA

^bHankamer School of Business, Baylor University, Baylor, TX 76798, USA

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Abstract

Sales organizations are continuously developing new ideas and approaches to be more competitive. One of the approaches taken by most successful organizations is the move from individuals to boundary-spanning, cross-functional teams. Sales teams are being employed to counter efforts by buying organizations to form buying centers. It is proffered in this paper that organizations that are ready for change are conducive to enhancement of sales team learning. Organization readiness for change is a condition impacted by a variety of organizational antecedent variables such as culture and climate. This paper proposes that sales team learning is impacted by team members' perceptions of the organization's readiness for change. In addition, we also posit the moderating influence of two environmental variables: turbulence and competitive intensity on the relationship between readiness for change and sales team learning. Sales team learning is then proposed to be related to a variety of sales outcomes. In this paper, we present a conceptual framework for understanding the contexts in which team learning occurs and the impact of team learning on team effectiveness. Throughout the paper, we present research propositions that provide opportunities for future examinations of team learning.

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1. Introduction

Management consultants and theorists have long emphasized the need for firms to alter their traditional approaches, experiment with new organizational structures, production processes, and marketing programs, and learn from the successes and failures they encounter when implementing new and different approaches (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). As the rate of business change continues to accelerate, sales organizations face challenging situations like rapid new product developments, corporate restructuring, emerging technolo-

gies, and globalization. The demands for handling change are rapidly increasing. One of the approaches taken by many successful sales organizations is the move from individualism to cross-functional, boundary-spanning teamwork (Perry, Pearce, & Sims, 1999). Moore (1994) suggests that such a change helps organizations because the very nature of a formal team allows for the accessibility to "pooled intelligence." This approach is of particular interest in the area of business-to-business selling. As products and services become more technologically advanced, organizations are moving toward the formation of selling teams that help them stay competitive (Moon & Strong, 1994).

A change-ready organization includes skill-based centers of excellence (Clark, Cavanaugh, Brown, & Sambamurthy, 1997). As sales organizations grow in their use and understanding of teams, it is imperative that they learn how the organization influences sales teams, how sales teams function, how sales teams play a learning role for the sales organization, and what makes sales teams effective. Understanding of learning in teams is a burgeoning but still

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-713-743-4579; fax: +1-713-743-4572.

E-mail addresses: deva@uh.edu (D. Rangarajan), larry_chonko@baylor.edu (L.B. Chonko), eli-jones@uh.edu (E. Jones), jim_roberts@baylor.edu (J.A. Roberts).

¹ Tel.: +1-254-710-4243; fax: +1-254-710-1068.

² Tel.: +1-713-743-4702; fax: +1-713-743-4572.

³ Tel.: +1-254-710-4952; fax: +1-254-710-1068.

limited focus of study. However, the growing reliance on sales teams in times of change beckons for understanding of the factors that enable team learning. For example, Edmondson (1999) found that for a team to consistently achieve high levels of performance, its members must actively ask questions, discuss errors, engage in experimentation and reflection, and seek external feedback. In other words, the team must learn. She predicted that teams that were effective at *learning* would attain better performance. As such, one broad goal of this paper is to address the question “What are the organizational features that will enhance team learning and the corresponding outcomes associated with learning?”

2. A framework for examining change, learning, and related outcomes among sales teams

Fig. 1 presents a framework for examining antecedents and consequences of sales team learning.

In Fig. 1, organizational culture and climate are posited to affect sales team members’ perceptions of an organization’s readiness for change. In the context of a dynamic business environment, sales organizations must be ready for change. Organization readiness for change is the extent to which the individual employees perceive that the organization has the capacity to enhance successful change (Eby, Danielle, Russell, & Gaby, 2000). The extent to which organizational policies and practices are supportive of change is important in understanding how a team of individuals perceive their organization’s (or their) readiness for change. How individuals view an organization’s readiness for change is their judgment of the ability to make changes successfully (Kotter, 1995). These judgments are based on organizational factors that represent one of the key levers for building and sustaining change capabilities (Lawler, 1996).

We then propose that perceptions of an organization’s readiness for change will impact sales team learning, as

shown in Fig. 1. According to Baldwin, Danielson, and Wiggerhorn (1997), learning and change are partners. The domain of learning includes any activity that might shape an organization in the future. In Fig. 1, sales team characteristics are also postulated to be related to sales team learning. Team learning has as its focus the direction and development of actions, thoughts, and desires of team members (Barker & Camarata, 1998). Druskat (2000) defines team learning as team members acquiring and sharing unique knowledge and information and examining what is helping and hurting team performance to continually improve as a unit. This implies that team learning requires discussion of novel information, uncharted and sometimes uncomfortable topics. It is important that sales teams share information and action and carry the team learning perspective to others in the organization.

In Fig. 1, environmental variables (competitive intensity and turbulence) are proposed to moderate the relationship between perceptions of readiness for change and team learning. Turbulent business environments pose new imperatives for the sales force: like change emphasizing rapid delivery of product applications, agile response to changes in markets and competition, and leveraging of skills across organizational boundaries (Nolan & Croson, 1995). Fig. 1 further posits the existence of a relationship between sales team learning and various sales force change-related outcomes. Finally, we examine several characteristics of sales teams that can have an impact on sales team learning. In Section 3, we will describe the composition of sales teams and the roles of each member in the sales team.

3. Sales teams

Sales teams form an integral part of many sales organizations and are critical for the effective functioning of an organization. Cohen and Levinthal (1990) argue that

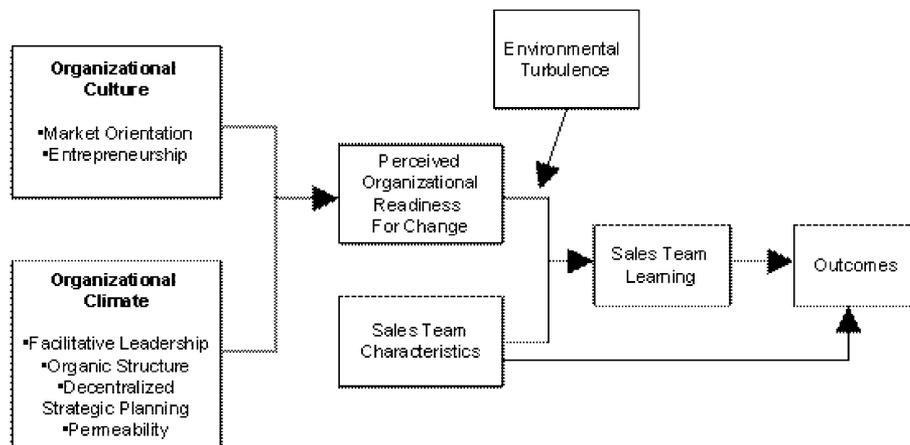


Fig. 1. A framework for sales team learning and change.

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