Journal of Business Research 67 (2014) 1991–1999

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

The effect of communication practice on deviance among Korean salespeople: The mediating role of intrinsic motivation

Jaewon (Jay) Yoo [a,1], Karen Flaherty [b,*], Gary L. Frankwick [c,2]

[a] Small Business and Entrepreneurialship Department, Soongsil University, Seoul 156-743,South Korea
[b] Marketing Department, Spears School of Business, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078-4011, United States
[c] Department of Marketing and Management, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, TX 79968-0539, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 7 January 2013
Received in revised form 10 October 2013
Accepted 22 October 2013
Available online 11 November 2013

Keywords:
Salesperson deviance
Motivation
Communication
Trust

ABSTRACT

Previous research on salesperson behavior largely focused on positive and productive behavior and less on the negative side of the salesperson behavior. This research examines the effect of leader–member communication exchange on salesperson workplace deviance and the mediating role of trust and intrinsic motivation in this relationship. Data were collected from 469 salespeople in the Korean banking industry. Results of the structural equation model show that indirect and bi-directional communication between manager and salesperson decrease salesperson workplace deviance by increasing trust and motivation. However, communication frequency and mood have no significant effects on salesperson trust. Finally, motivation (achievement, status, and communion striving) plays a mediating role in the negative relationships between salesperson trust and his/her deviant behavior toward specific targets (organization, coworker, and customer).

More than half of all sales managers report that salespeople cheating on expense reports, almost half suspect salespeople of lying to customers, and a third of sales managers believe that salespeople behave less ethically now than 20 years ago (Strout, 2002). From a broader perspective, professional watchdog groups rank salespeople among the most unethical business professionals (Collins, 1995). These negative behaviors can prove costly to sales organizations. When salespeople violate company rules and defy acceptable norms of exchange, the internal functioning of the organization is harmed (Ball, Trevino, & Sims, 1994; Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006a,b) resulting in negative effects felt by fellow salespeople, future firm performance, and the broader reputation of the firm.

Despite the incidence of salesperson deviant behavior and its associated cost, the concept has received scant attention in the literature. Past research has focused mostly on defining the construct, and delineating various types of workplace deviance, including organization deviance, interpersonal deviance, customer deviance and frontline deviance (e.g., Darrat, Amyx, & Bennett, 2010; Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006a,b). Some research has sought to answer the question of what causes salesperson deviance. Darrat et al. (2010) demonstrate that work–family conflict leads to an increase in salesperson deviance. Jelinek and Ahearne (2006a,b) link organizational factors including bureaucracy, future orientation, justice, perceptions of top management tolerance for unethical behavior, and intrafirm competition to salesperson deviance. Other sales research suggests that salesperson ‘fit’ with the organization is critical to determining the likelihood of deviance (Darrat, 2010). In a general management context, a host of personal characteristics, such as employee age, gender, job tenure (Hollinger & Clark, 1983; Lau, Au, & Ho, 2003) and outlook on life (Aquino, Lewis, & Bradfield, 1999) have also been tied to the prevalence of employee deviance.

Extending this research, Jelinek and Ahearne (2010) consider the role the manager plays in determining deviant behavior. In order to fully understand the effect that individual and organizational characteristics have on the likelihood of deviant behavior, we must consider boundary conditions that serve to either constrain or provoke the likelihood of deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). In this vein, Jelinek and Ahearne show that, while working long hours and individual competitiveness lead to salesperson deviance, the extent to which the manager takes time to explain the meaningfulness of the work to the salesperson can reduce these effects. Thus, Jelinek and Ahearne (2010) offer initial evidence that the manager does play a role in determining whether or not certain conditions eventually result in deviant behavior.

Building on this premise, we extend the work by Jelinek and Ahearne and focus, more generally, on how the manager's communication style impacts salesperson deviance. We propose that the manager's communication style ultimately influences deviance because it affects the richness of the manager–salesperson relationship. Salesperson deviant behavior is defined here as a salesperson's “voluntary behavior” that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; p. 556).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 405 744 8653; fax: +1 405 744 5180.
E-mail addresses: yjw1774@ssu.ac.kr (J.(J.) Yoo), karen.flaherty@okstate.edu (K. Flaherty), glfrankwick@utep.edu (G.L. Frankwick).
[1] Tel.: +82 2 828 7028.
[2] Tel.: +1 915 747 6051; fax: +1 915 747 5385.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.10.012

Of the interpersonal relationships people develop at work none are more important than those employees have with their immediate supervisors. The manager–salesperson relationship involves a series of complex social exchanges (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Grounded in social exchange theory (cf. Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958) and specifically taking a leader–member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997) point of view, we argue that communication, trust, and motivation play a role in the resulting manager–salesperson relationship. We empirically examine the effect of manager communication style on salesperson deviant behavior. We further identify two mediating constructs (i.e., trust and motivation) through which the manager's communication style is likely to affect the incidence of salesperson deviant behavior. By bridging two previously unconnected literatures (i.e., leader–member exchange and salesperson deviance), we extend our understanding of when and why salespeople are likely to engage in these harmful, negative behaviors, and how sales managers influence this process. Unlike prior research, our explanation highlights the importance of the manager–salesperson exchange relationship.

1. Literature review

1.1. Salesperson deviance

Since the 1980s researchers have examined salesperson *ethics* in terms of marketing management (Chonko & Hunt, 1985); theory (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986); and behavior (Chonko & Burnett, 1983; DeConinck & Good, 1989; Dubinsky, 1980; Dubinsky, Ingram, & Rudelius, 1985). Brass, Butterfield, and Skaggs (1998) define unethical behavior following Jones (1991) as “behavior that has a harmful effect upon others and is either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community” (p. 15).

While unethical behavior has been studied quite extensively, employee *deviance* has received less attention. Employee deviance is defined as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; p. 556). Employees voluntarily deviate from organizational norms because they either lack the motivation to conform to social expectations or they become motivated to violate the expectations (Kaplan, 1975). Lewis (1985) notes that there is an importance distinction between workplace deviance and unethical behavior in that the former focuses on behaviors that violate organizational norms, while the latter focuses on behavior that is right or wrong in terms of justice, law, or other societal guidelines determining behavior morality. Thus, salespeople can behave both deviantly and unethically. The two qualities are not the same, and can be done independently (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

As mentioned previously, past research on employee deviance proposes various types of deviant behaviors. Robinson and Bennett (1995) proposed the initial classification scheme for deviant behaviors. Specifically, these researchers classify behaviors according to whether they are directed at the employee's organization (organizational deviance) or other people in the company (interpersonal deviance) (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Bennett and Robinson's (2000) classification works well to study deviant behaviors in many organizational settings. However, Jelinek and Ahearne (2006a,b) note that it lacks the rigor to examine deviance in a professional selling context primarily due to the unique boundary-spanning nature of the professional salesperson's job.

In addition to interacting with people from their own organizations, salespeople typically spend a great deal of time out of the office meeting prospects and customers. As a result, salespeople may be more susceptible to participation in deviant behavior because they often need to balance conflicting expectations from their managers and coworkers with those of prospects and customers. Salespeople generally have performance goals (i.e., quotas) to meet, which can further increase the occurrence of work stress and overload (Jones, Chonko, Rangarajan, & Roberts, 2007). In addition, salespeople often work without direct supervision. Therefore, their behavior may go largely unnoticed by management.

Despite the likely importance of understanding deviance in a sales context, surprisingly little research attention has been directed to the topic. Again, only a few sales-related studies have considered what factors influence salesperson deviant behavior. Key antecedents identified include characteristics, such as work–family conflict (Darrat et al., 2010), organizational bureaucracy, future orientation, justice, perceptions of top management tolerance for unethical behavior, intrafirm competition to salesperson deviance (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006a,b), and person–organization fit (Darrat, 2010).

2. Research framework and hypotheses

The current research strives to fill this important gap in our understanding of the factors that influence salesperson deviant behavior. While prior research indicates that organizational and personal characteristics impact deviant behavior, we still know very little about how the salesperson's interactions with the manager impact these behaviors. From a theoretical perspective, we suggest that the social interactions that take place between the salesperson and the manager will be relevant to determining the salesperson's behavior (Blau, 1964; Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). If the salesperson has a good relationship with the manager, then he/she will be less likely to behave poorly for a number of reasons. We argue that the manager's communication with the salesperson is critical to determining the salesperson's behavior because it impacts the quality of the relationship (i.e., trust), which ultimately drives salesperson motivation.

2.1. Communication practice and salesperson trust in manager

A large body of research has focused on the relationships between salespeople and their managers. The manager's behavior has been shown to impact the salesperson's ability, training, and motivation (Yammarino, 1997). Social exchange theory, in general, and the leader–member exchange (LMX) literature, more specifically, have provided a foundation for studying the salesperson–sales manager relationship. LMX suggests that managers form different types of relationships with their workers. Trust, respect and the existence of common goals characterize high LMX relationships, while low LMX relationships are characterized by contractual, impersonal interactions that do not extend beyond the job description (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Taking an LMX perspective, we argue that the manager's communication with the salesperson influences the salesperson's trust in the manager.

In line with Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin (1996), we define communication as the formality, bi-directionality, frequency, and quality (specificity) of information shared between exchange partners. Communication facilitates understanding in social situations and provides procedural knowledge required to conduct successful exchanges (Berger & Roloff, 1982). The act of disclosing specific information, in and of itself, can reduce uncertainty by enabling salespeople as well as sales managers to predict how each will likely behave.

Hunt et al. (2006) specify ten forms of relationship marketing that include external relationships (e.g., salesperson–buyer) as well as internal relationships (e.g., manager–employee). The success of these relationships depends upon a set of ‘relational factors’ including trust (Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and communication (Mohr & Nevin, 1990; Mohr et al., 1996). In order for salespeople to build effective relationships with customers, they must first have good relationships with sales managers. Hunt et al. (2006) explain that communication can help build better relationships in exchange situations by helping align goals, resolve disputes, and identify new value creating