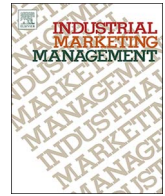




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# Reducing salesperson job stress and unethical intent: The influence of leader-member exchange relationship, socialization and ethical ambiguity<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to better understand the role of LMX relationship in the business-to-business ethical decision making process. Drawing on leadership and ethical decision making theory, this paper develops and tests a model that examines the relationships among LMX, work-group socialization, ethical ambiguity, job stress and unethical intention in the salesforce.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The sample includes 408 business-to-business salespeople. Structural equation modeling is used to test the study's hypotheses.

**Findings:** Findings suggest that LMX relationship quality directly affects ethical ambiguity, work-group socialization and unethical intent. Work-group socialization is related to ethical ambiguity, which affects job stress. Job stress is positively related to unethical intent.

**Research implications:** Empirical tests support six of eight hypotheses and suggest managerial implications and directions for future research.

**Originality/value:** This paper develops and tests a model that examines the relationships among constructs not previously examined, as they relate to LMX and ethical decision making.

## 1. Introduction

Sales organizations are essential to success (e.g., Pullins, Timonen, Kaski, & Holopainen, 2017; Spreer & Rauschnabel, 2016; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014) and vital to firm survival (Guenzi, Sajtos, & Troilo, 2016). Salespeople contribute to this mission by generating revenue (e.g., Goad & Jaramillo, 2014; Lai, 2016) in complex and uncertain environments (Williams, Chickilly, Zeglinski, & Fry, 2012). This requires constantly identifying, managing, and mitigating a variety of conflicting obstacles (Banin et al., 2016), such as meeting sales goals, building customer relationships, and representing seller interests while managing client needs in highly competitive markets. Led by sales managers (Ahearne, Till, Kraus, & Wieseke, 2013; Lounsbury, Foster, Levy, & Gibson, 2014), the relationships between salespeople and their superiors are expected to synergistically create positive outcomes. Still, unintended and damaging organizational consequences may occur in this setting, and are the focus of this research.

One needs to look no further than the recent scandal at Wells Fargo Bank to see negative consequences from pressures to improve the

“bottom line.” Sales representatives unethically opened two million deposit accounts and credit cards without customer authorization in response to management culture and incentives (Gibson, 2016). Clearly, leadership played an important role, as could be predicted by ethical decision making models (e.g., Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Trevino, 1986), as well as research on sales force leadership (Ingram, LaForge, Locander, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2005; McClaren, 2013). Although not considered in these models, a contributing factor and unintended negative consequence in the ethical decision making process may be job stress. The potential negative impacts of job stress on employment tenure (e.g., Rizwan et al., 2017; Vong & Tang, 2017) and performance (e.g., Banerjee & Mehta, 2016; Olusegun, Oluwasayo, & Olawoyim, 2014) indicate its importance in organizations operating under constant selling pressure. Coupled with unethical behaviors that impact issues such as customer relationships (Li & Murphy, 2012), buyer satisfaction (Kaynak & Sert, 2012) and targeting of vulnerable customers (Coward & Darke, 2014), the need for sellers to minimize job stress and unethical intentions is critical.

Based on this framework, the current study examines sales

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leadership's impact on salesperson job stress and intent to behave unethically. To accomplish this, we examine how leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships function through both work-group socialization and ethical ambiguity to influence business-to-business salespeople's job stress and intent to behave unethically. Representing the quality level of working relationships between subordinates and supervisors (Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999), LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) offers insight into sales managers' leadership interactions (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2013; Lounsbury et al., 2014) which should impact seller outcomes. Accompanying research in work-group socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), and ethical ambiguity, this study examines potential leader interactions (e.g., Hampton, Dubinsky, & Skinner, 1986; Michaels, Cron, Dubinsky, & Joachimsthaler, 1988; Sager, Yi, & Futrell, 1998; Tanner, Dunn, & Chonko, 1993) as the basis of the proposed research.

It is expected this research will provide several valuable research and practitioner insights into chiefly underexplored and important areas. First, ethical decision making models point to the significance of leadership in influencing subordinates' ethical behavior, yet they generally fail to articulate specific leadership styles or approaches that influence such behavior. This research examines and provides insight regarding a specific leadership approach (i.e., LMX) as it relates to ethical decision making. Second, this research highlights an unintended and potentially negative consequence (i.e., job stress) associated with ethical decision making. Third, we learn how ethical ambiguity may lead to job stress and how LMX superior-subordinate relationships may affect this dynamic. Finally, we examine and enhance our understanding of the role of work-group socialization as it relates to LMX leadership and to the ethical decision making process. In summary, we enhance our understanding of how to reduce job stress and improve ethical decision making in the salesforce.

The paper starts by providing the theoretical background and justification for the proposed hypotheses. The methodology is explained and the research results are reported. Finally, discussion of each hypothesis and related implications for management and research are provided, before closing with limitations and directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

The model illustrated in Fig. 1 proposes how LMX as a leadership style may lead to lower job stress and lower unethical behavior. LMX (leader-member exchange) theory is utilized in this study because it

provides a strong theoretical underpinning that is specific to managerial oversight of the sales organization. Its ability to impact important sales force behaviors makes it valuable to study, yet it has received little attention in the context of ethical decision making. LMX theory directly focuses on the dyadic relationship between the salesperson and sales manager. Specifically, the quality of superior-subordinate relationships in sales organizations can impact subordinate behaviors (Paparoidamis & Guenzi, 2009) critical to the operational success of the salesforce.

The theories that provide the overarching justification of links from LMX management style to the mediators and outcomes depicted in the model are social learning, social information process and ethical decision-making theory. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests that people learn by observing and modeling the behavior of others. Social information process theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) states that how employees respond to the design of their jobs is influenced by information from other people. While getting more information through interactions with others, it is expected that organization members will interpret the contextual environment better, and therefore, reduce deleterious factors such as ethical ambiguity that lead to job stress and unethical intentions.

The theories provide consistency in explaining the impact the supervisor has via LMX management style and other experienced salespeople working in groups can have in providing information that the salesperson will pay attention to or ignore. Ethical decision making theory complements this learning process by suggesting that supervisors and work groups may convey important signals about how to behave appropriately regarding ethical behaviors. This dissemination of ethical information can assist salespeople in having clarity and making ethical decisions.

When making decisions involving ethical content, individuals generally seek others for ethical guidance (Kohlberg, 1969; Trevino, 1986), resulting in managers playing a pivotal role in influencing ethical decision making in the organization. As leaders, managers have the capacity to influence salespeople through their own attitudes, values and behaviors, which are viewed by followers as signals for appropriate behavior in the salesforce. Direct interactions between salespeople and sales managers provide additional opportunities for sales managers to influence salespeople. In this regard, LMX is a leadership style that is proposed in this study to support the reduction of job stress and impact unethical intentions both directly and via work groups.

Research in ethical decision making in the organization indicates that individuals must first recognize a moral issue, before making a

Hypothesized Relationships Among Study Variables

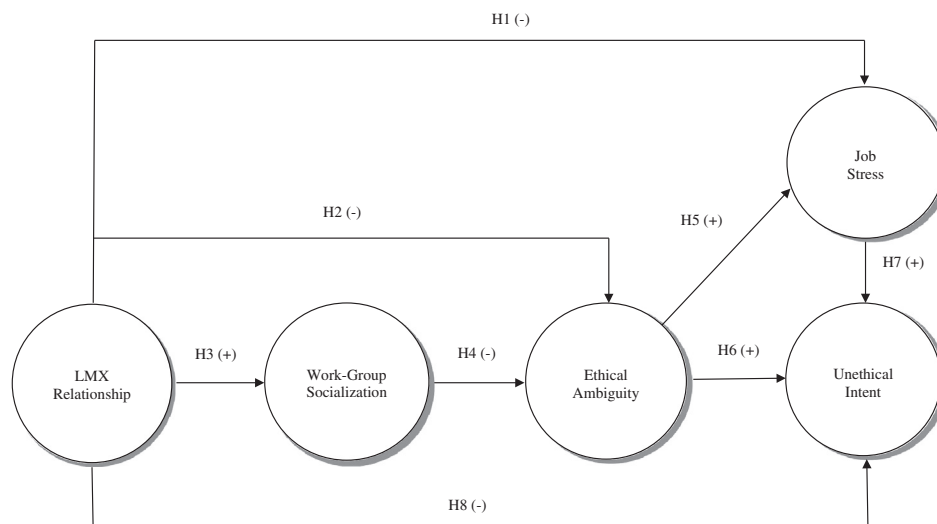


Fig. 1. Hypothesized relationships among study variables.

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