

Political Skill Dimensions and Salesperson's Obtainment of Internal Support – A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Although sales literature suggests that salespeople increasingly need to gain internal support, research on how salespeople facilitate active internal support from co-workers to successfully complete pending sales transactions is scarce. We address this issue by exploring the role of political skill in this context. By integrating past research with results from a qualitative study, we not only propose political skill to be important in this regard, but uncover different mechanisms through which the construct's distinct dimensions may exert a positive influence on a salesperson's internal support. Moreover, we find the degree of team fluidity within a sales organisation to be an important moderator in the relationship between the distinct political skill dimensions and a salesperson's internal support. Our findings complement literature with an understanding of how and under what conditions political skill positively affects a salesperson's internal support.

Keywords: salesperson's internal support, political skill, team fluidity

Track: Sales Management and Personal Selling

1. Introduction

As customer requirements and sales processes become more complex (Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj, 2007), the fulfilment of particular customer transactions and individual salesperson performance no longer depend solely on the individual salesperson's engagement (Steward, Walker, Hutt, and Kumar, 2010). Meeting demanding customer needs often lies beyond the competence of a single salesperson, and requires salespeople to engage their co-workers in the sales process to obtain the internal support that is necessary to successfully complete customer transactions (Moon & Armstrong, 1994; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Homburg, Workman, and Jensen, 2002). Research therefore has started to view the salesperson "as an intrapreneur, weaving and navigating across his organization to better serve customers" (Plouffe, 2018, p. 248). Although, research points to the value for salespeople to gain internal support (Evans, McFarland, Dietz, and Jaramillo, 2012; Plouffe & Barclay, 2007), related research is still in its infancy. While sales literature offers some initial insights into how salespeople gain access to internal resources (Plouffe & Grégoire, 2011; Li, Sun, and Cheng, 2015; Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, and Ferris, 2015), we still know little about how salespeople can foster the level of active support they receive from colleagues during pending sales transactions (Plouffe, 2018).

We address this issue by exploring the role of political skill, which has been identified to be an interpersonal skill of increasing importance within the intra-organisational dimension of sales research (Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, and Ferris, 2015; Li, Sun, and Cheng, 2015). Using insights from leadership research (Brouer, Douglas, Treadway, and Ferris, 2012; Buch, Thompson, and Kuvaas, 2016), we not only propose political skill to be beneficial for salespeople to foster active internal support from co-workers, but more importantly uncover how the construct's distinct dimensions operate in this context. Therefore, we draw on findings from an exploratory qualitative study. By examining how distinct political skill dimensions correspond with particular strategies that salespeople use to facilitate their co-workers' support, we conclude on the underlying mechanisms within the relationship between political skill and a salesperson's internal support. From a theoretical perspective we complement existing research with an in-depth understanding of how political skill operates to influence a salesperson's internal support. Moreover, we reveal team fluidity as a crucial boundary condition within the observed relationship, and contribute to the scarce knowledge regarding the contextual conditions that strengthen or weaken the relevance of the construct's distinct facets when influencing an outcome (Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, and Munyon, 2012). From a practitioner's perspective our findings are a starting point to more effectively train salespeople.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Salesperson's internal support

Against the backdrop of an increasing need for a salesperson's internal support, the sales literature differentiates between two forms of support a salesperson can receive from inside the company, namely: social/psychological and instrumental support (Stan, Evans, Arnold, and McAmis, 2012). Our research is focussed on the active support a salesperson obtains in pending sales transactions. We therefore refer to the instrumental dimension of internal support, which addresses the task-related support a salesperson gains, such as knowledge, information or task assistance (Deelstra et al., 2003). Although, past research has started to acknowledge the need for such task-related support, existing work addresses the issue of how salespeople can gain internal support only implicitly or considers co-workers as rather passive actors that allow access to resources without necessarily providing salespeople with active support (Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, and Ferris, 2015; Li, Sun, and Cheng, 2015). Though, Plouffe and Grégoire (2011) find a salesperson's "sales navigation" to be an important activity in this context, their construct describes a rather global and general networking behaviour, and does therefore not allow much insight into how salespeople actually mobilise active internal support. One first notable step in this regard is the work of Plouffe, Bolander, Cote, and Hochstein (2016). However, their research focusses on how the general use of discrete internally directed influence tactics impacts individual sales performance and does not explicitly address the issue of mobilising internal support. Nevertheless, research recognises that salespeople regularly assemble and coordinate ad hoc teams, comprising different personnel of the selling company (Evans, McFarland, Dietz, and Jaramillo, 2012; Steward, Walker, Hutt, and Kumar, 2010; Moon & Armstrong, 1994), and highlights the importance of "the degree and quality to which co-workers coordinate details and tasks on behalf of the salesperson as they pertain to specific sales opportunities" (Plouffe & Barclay, 2007, p. 534). Thus, research obviously points to the need for salespeople to foster the level of internal support they receive. To our knowledge however, no academic work explicitly investigates how a salesperson can facilitate his or her co-workers active support and what role interpersonal skills play in this regard.

2.2 Political skill and internal support

In the context of the growing attention to the intra-organisational dimension of sales research, political skill gained some attraction in the more recent sales literature (Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, and Ferris, 2015; Li, Sun, and Cheng, 2015; Plouffe, 2018), because it refers to an individual's ability to understand and interpret social environments at work and use this

knowledge to influence others to reach personal and organisational goals (Ferris et al., 2005). Political skill is a multidimensional construct that combines a person's ability to understand social environments and interactions (social astuteness), to exert interpersonal influence in adaptive ways (interpersonal influence), to build strong relationships and networks (networking ability), and to appear as honest and sincere (apparent sincerity) (Ferris et al., 2007).

To suggest a link between political skill and salesperson's internal support, we consider the leadership literature to be important, because within the ad hoc sales teams that need to be coordinated in complex sales tasks, a salesperson similarly to a formal leader typically acts as the "team leader, opportunity coordinator, and champion" (Plouffe, Bolander, Cote, and Hochstein, 2016, p. 108). The idea of a positive relationship between political skill (of a leader) and enhanced support (by subordinates) is not new to leadership research (Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, and Ammeter, 2004), though empirically still scarcely addressed. Brouer, Douglas, Treadway, and Ferris (2012) find that political skill promotes leadership effectiveness. The authors explain this effect by the ability of political skilled leaders to develop high quality relationships with their followers, which in turn, and in line with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), lead to enhanced work effort and increased leader support by subordinates (Brouer, Douglas, Treadway, and Ferris, 2012). In another study, Buch, Thompson, and Kuvaas (2016) also find evidence for the positive effect of political skill in the context of the support leaders receive from their subordinates. However, these authors do not trace this effect back to high quality leader-subordinate relationships, but the ability of politically skilled leaders to understand the self-interests and immediate needs of their followers, and provide them with attractive benefits that are valued by the subordinates. Subordinates in turn reciprocate the leader's positive behaviour through increased effort, although in a rather short term and more instrumental manner, instead of feelings of increased personal obligation (Buch, Thompson, and Kuvaas, 2016). Both examples from the literature provide a substantial basis for expecting political skill to foster internal support. However, the conclusions that the authors of the two studies draw, are based on different explanations on how political skill may foster leaders' support. In light of this, we have to consider that political skill is a multidimensional construct, consisting of four facets (Ferris et al., 2007). The existing literature suggests that the construct's distinct dimensions probably affect an outcome through different mechanisms and under different boundary conditions, and points to the need of further exploration (Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, and Munyon, 2012). Based on this, we consider it is likely that the distinct dimensions of political skill foster salesperson's internal support through different mechanisms, whose relevance may depend on contextual conditions.

3. Methodology

We applied a discovery oriented qualitative research approach (Deshpande, 1983) to understand what strategies and activities salespeople use to facilitate support from their co-workers in sales transactions, and how these behaviours are related to the distinctive dimensions of the political skill construct. We conducted 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 9 male and 1 female salespeople from different business sectors. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Our interviewees had sales experience ranging from 2 to 19 years. To qualify our interviewees, we relied on a theoretical sampling procedure. Thereby, we ensured that our sample consists only of salespeople which provide customers with complex B2B products and solutions, and therefore typically need to engage co-workers to complete sales transactions. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Following a grounded theory approach, we first analysed the collected data through open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We finally applied selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to refine the theory and derive propositions.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of our interviews suggest two general strategies that salespeople may use to increase the level of internal support they receive from co-workers during pending sales transactions. We characterise these strategies as ‘long-term partnering’ and ‘short-term support intervention’.

Long-term partnering is the first out of two uncovered strategies salespeople use. This strategy is aiming at building strong and long lasting relationships with co-workers that are characterised by mutual trust and obligation. As suggested by social exchange theory, salespeople use long-term partnering to induce reciprocal behaviour from their co-workers that stem from feelings of mutual trust and obligation, and through which support is provided during sales transactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The respondents in our investigation try to develop high quality relationships by permanent networking and frequent personal interaction. In this context, almost all of our respondents noted the crucial importance of a constant personal exchange, that goes beyond customer- or business transaction-related information, to foster trust-based internal relationships. By constantly providing colleagues with relationship benefits on a long-term basis, salespeople build up ‘relationship credits’ with co-workers and gain their trust, that consequently increase co-workers’ willingness to support the salesperson’s specific sales opportunities. The behaviours salespeople use to provide their colleagues with relationship benefits under a long-term partnering strategy are primarily socioemotional (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) in nature: being attentive, participate co-workers in work

processes, or providing psychological support by offering help and genuine interest in co-workers personal issues. Important to our research focus is the fact that our respondents pointed out the importance of an honest and open communication style “at eye level” as well as respectful and appreciative social manners for this strategy to be successful.

Relating these insights to political skill, we find two dimensions of this construct to be particularly relevant in the context of long-term partnering: networking ability and apparent sincerity. While networking ability should be beneficial for salespeople to build and maintain social bonds with co-workers through networking behaviours and frequent interaction, apparent sincerity should help salespeople to do this in an authentic and sincere manner, thereby fostering trust and credibility within the relationship (Ferris et al., 2007). Thus,

Proposition 1: The political skill dimensions of networking ability and apparent sincerity are positively related to salesperson’s internal support through the salesperson’s ability to build and maintain trustful and reciprocal relationships with co-workers.

Short-term support intervention is the second fundamental strategy our analysis revealed. We term this strategy short-term support intervention to underline its intervening character. By applying this strategy, salespeople do not rely on co-workers’ feelings of being obligated, but draw from alternative sources to gain internal support. Short-term support intervention is characterised by tactically influencing co-workers to facilitate their support. In our analysis we uncovered different influence tactics salespeople use to gain support: rational argumentation, explanation of the current situation, creation of sympathy, and visualisation of results. Especially in connection with interpersonal influence attempts, short-term support intervention also includes benefits salespeople provide their co-workers with to gain assistance. Contrary to the first explained strategy, under this approach this rather happens in a ‘tit for tat’ manner by stimulating reciprocal behaviour through providing colleagues with short-term oriented benefits. According to our interviewees, salespeople typically provide co-workers with concrete and direct (i.e. economic) benefits, such as doing favours or making concessions, to foster cooperative behaviour. It has to be noted, that our respondents explicitly referred to the exceptional interpersonal abilities needed to successfully apply short-term support intervention. Salespeople explained that an understanding of the co-worker’s underlying motives is a prerequisite for both, selecting the “right” benefits to stimulate colleagues and effectively exerting influence. Only if a salesperson understands what benefits colleagues really value in a given situation and what really drives their behaviour, can the right influence approaches and benefits be chosen. This requires high levels of empathy, which enables salespeople to reveal,

and subsequently act on the hidden drivers of their co-workers' behaviour. Our respondents underlined the importance of face-to-face contact as well as the right timing of communication efforts in this context, and pointed out the need of aligning communication styles with the individual needs of particular colleagues.

From a political skill perspective, these results offer rich insights. The need for salespeople to accurately understand their internal counterparts and to effectively sense their immediate needs and motivations closely corresponds with the social astuteness dimension of political skill, which reflects the ability of a person to precisely understand and interpret social environments and interactions (Ferris et al., 2007). Moreover, salespeople should be better able to influence co-workers if they possess high levels within the interpersonal influence dimension of political skill, because this enables them to adapt their behaviour in an appropriate manner, which helps to move co-workers towards desired responses (Ferris et al., 2007). Thus,

Proposition 2: The political skill dimensions of social astuteness and interpersonal influence are positively related to a salesperson's internal support through the salesperson's ability to correctly read co-workers, and consequently exert adjusted influence on them.

Overall, our interviews revealed, that our respondents in general tend to build strong relationships and preferably rely on long-term partnering to gain the internal support they need in sales-transactions. Building and benefiting from relationships characterised by trust and mutual obligations, however, requires frequent personal interaction, and the opportunities to work with particular colleagues on customer engagements on a regular basis. Contrary, frequently changing internal partners and rather unstable workplace relations often hinder relationship building and cause lower relationship quality between salespeople and co-workers. In this case, co-workers need to be motivated through means of rather instrumental benefits and interpersonal influence, which heightens the importance of short-term support intervention. Thus, while networking ability and apparent sincerity should be especially beneficial under conditions that promote opportunities to interact personally on a frequent basis, social astuteness and interpersonal influence should be especially helpful to foster support within the context of weaker work relationships.

Against the backdrop of an increasingly team-oriented selling environment (Homburg, Workman, and Jensen, 2002), Bradford, Challagalla, Hunter, and Moncrief (2012) develop a conceptual framework to differentiate sales organisations based on the stability of team structures. They suggest that group structures in sales organisations lie on a continuum spanning from 'fluid' to 'dedicated' team structures. According to the authors, the more team

membership is based on a particular sales opportunity, and the more impermanent team structures are, the more can sales organisations be considered as being fluid. Building on this and on the work of Moon and Armstrong (1994), we understand ‘team fluidity’ in terms of different sales team compositions from one sales opportunity to another. Higher levels of team fluidity typically require a salesperson to coordinate with a larger number of co-workers that, in addition, change from one sales opportunity to another. Relating this to our interest in the contextual conditions that may strengthen or weaken the importance of distinct political skill dimensions, we suggest team fluidity to moderate the relationship between the dimensions of political skill and a salesperson’s internal support. We expect, that under the condition of high team fluidity a salesperson cannot fully utilise the potential of his or her networking ability and apparent sincerity, because in this context, he or she has fewer opportunities to interact with the same internal partners to build trustful and strong relationships. High team fluidity, on the other hand, should leverage the impact of social astuteness and interpersonal influence, because under this condition, salespeople need to motivate and influence their co-workers in a rather instrumental manner to compensate for the missing high quality work relationships. Thus,

Proposition 3: The level of team fluidity moderates the relationship between the dimensions of political skill and a salesperson’s internal support: Higher levels of team fluidity will strengthen the positive effect of social astuteness and interpersonal influence, and weaken the positive effect of networking ability and apparent sincerity on salesperson’s internal support.

5. Conclusion

Combining the results from past research and a qualitative study, we suggest that the distinct dimensions of a salesperson’s political skill unfold their impact in different ways, when exerting influence on the level of internal support a salesperson receives. From a sales perspective we deepen the understanding of why and how political skill affects a salesperson’s internal support. From a broader theoretical standpoint, we advance research by responding to the call for more research on the role that the construct’s distinct dimensions play, when impacting outcomes (Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, and Munyon, 2012). Revealing team fluidity as an important boundary condition, we furthermore not only complement research on the contextual moderators of political skill (Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, and Munyon, 2012), but provide valuable implications for sales managers to better understand the organisational conditions that leverage the impact of one or the other facet of a salesperson’s political skill in the context of gaining internal support.

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