

*Journal of*  
**Personal Selling  
& Sales  
Management**

WINTER 2008, VOLUME 28, NUMBER 1

Sales  
Management  
Association  
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# WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE SALES MANAGER? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY COMPARING SALESPERSON AND SALES MANAGER PERSPECTIVES

Dawn R. Deeter-Schmelz, Daniel J. Goebel, and Karen Norman Kennedy

This study builds on previous research concerning sales manager selection by examining the characteristics of effective sales managers from two perspectives—that of sales managers and sales representatives. Results of this exploratory study indicate that sales representatives assess the effectiveness of sales managers through the manager's broad knowledge base along with communication, listening, and human relations skills to develop a role as "supporter" of the sales force. Sales managers, on the other hand, believe that their knowledge base along with effective utilization of communication, listening, human relations, and organization skills allow them to be more of a "participant" in the sales process, thus strengthening their position as an effective sales manager. The implications of this and other findings are discussed in the manuscript.

Extensive research has developed and tested frameworks of salesperson performance and effectiveness (e.g., Sager, Yi, and Futrell 1998; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977; Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986). Obliquely related to this salesperson-related research is the research focused on sales management with an emphasis on job satisfaction (e.g., Kantak, Futrell, and Sager 1992; Swift and Campbell 1998) and the sales manager–salesperson relationship (e.g., Brashear et al. 2003; Castleberry and Tanner 1986; DelVecchio 1998; Dubinsky 1999; Lysonski and Johnson 1983). Noticeably absent in the extant literature is a systematic understanding of the characteristics of effective sales managers. One result of this imbalance in research priorities is that, although much is known regarding the characteristics of salesperson effectiveness, far less is known about a sales manager's traits and performance characteristics (Mehta et al. 1999; Swift and Campbell 1998).

Researching the attributes present in effective sales managers is needed because sales managers have been shown to have great influence on sales representatives and the process by which salespeople initiate, develop, and expand customer relationships (e.g., Castleberry and Tanner 1986; Dubinsky 1999; Evans et al. 2002; Lysonski and Johnson 1983; Sager,

Yi, and Futrell 1998). Those same sales managers have been shown to influence a variety of outcomes, including sales force trust, morale, organizational commitment, ethical conduct, job stress, job performance, and the entire customer interface (e.g., Brashear et al. 2003; DelVecchio 1998; Guest and Meric 1989; Johlke et al. 2000; Lagace 1991; Mehta et al. 1999; Rich 1998; Sager, Yi, and Futrell 1998). With such a highly visible and influential role in the organization, researchers and managers acknowledge the importance of understanding sales manager selection and performance (Brewer 1997; Dubinsky 1999; Dubinsky and Ingram 1983; Guest and Meric 1989; Mehta et al. 1999; Sager, Yi, and Futrell 1998).

Despite the overall importance of sales managers to generating positive sales force outcomes, our understanding of sales manager selection and performance is in its infancy and growing slowly. A literature search seeking studies that investigated the traits or characteristics related to sales manager effectiveness revealed five studies spanning the 34-year period between 1972 and 2006. Given this paucity of research investigating the characteristics of effective sales managers and given the influence of sales managers on salespeople and the organization as a whole, developing a greater understanding of sales manager effectiveness is critical. The purpose of this research is to strengthen our understanding of sales manager effectiveness by examining the attributes, values, and consequences of effective sales managers from multiple perspectives. Specifically, we report an exploratory study to develop a foundation for

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The authors are listed in alphabetical order reflecting equal contribution. The authors acknowledge the helpful comments of Thomas DeCarlo in revising the manuscript, and thank the editor and the three anonymous *JPSM* reviewers for their guidance.

examining the following questions: What do sales managers and salespeople consider the most important attributes of effective sales managers? What are the similarities or differences among the attributes provided by both groups? How are the characteristics of effective sales managers related to consequences for the sales force and ultimately to the benefits or values these attributes offer the sales function?

### SALES MANAGER LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of extant literature revealed only five studies related to the identification of a broad range of sales manager traits (Brewer 1997; Dubinsky and Ingram 1983; Guest and Meric 1989; Spencer 1972) and an initial means–end analysis of sales manager attributes (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, and Goebel 2002). The first three studies investigated sales manager selection by providing lists of characteristics or traits for respondents to indicate each item's level of importance or relevance to sales manager selection. In these studies, researchers did not define the traits respondents were asked to rate, nor did the researchers explore further the meaning of these characteristics to respondents. The lack of a definition and follow-up led to the traits being subject to unclear interpretation, as evidenced by the Guest and Meric (1989) discussion concerning the “dominance” trait. Specifically, when respondents did not identify dominance as a trait desirable in sales managers as expected, the authors suggested that perhaps respondents held multiple perceptions of dominance, including “unpleasant,” “overbearing,” or “unduly aggressive” (Guest and Meric 1989, p. 50). It is important to note that the focus of the first three studies was the perceived importance of characteristics for sales manager *selection*. We still know very little about the *attributes of effective* sales managers, which is the focus of our research.

The fourth study suggests that the traits of high-performing salespeople are similar to those of high-performing sales managers (Brewer 1997), contrary to other evidence suggesting that sales performance does not necessarily translate into sales management effectiveness (Ziyal 1995). The final study provides an initial investigation into the attributes of effective sales managers (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, and Goebel 2002). The results identify the three major roles effective sales managers fulfill—that of communicator, motivator, and coach—with less emphasis given to the attributes themselves.

One should note that all five studies used various groups of professionals as respondents, not all with direct sales or sales management responsibilities. Spencer (1972) used a cross section of four levels of “corporate personnel,” whereas Guest and Meric (1989) relied on “human resource managers.” A group of “sales executives” provided the data for Dubinsky and Ingram's (1983) study and Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, and Goebel (2002) studied a mixed group of “sales professionals.”

Finally, Brewer's (1997) results were based on a cross section of “high-performing sales managers.” One key commonality among all of these studies is that none include or compare the perspectives of both sales managers and salespeople in the same study, which is a weakness of extant literature given previous calls for further research examining differences in sales manager–salesperson perceptions (Dubinsky 1998; Evans et al. 2002).

The previous review reveals that little research exists to help practitioners or researchers understand the characteristics of effective sales managers who are integral to the performance of a sales force. Because sales managers and sales representatives do not always view their sales world in the same fashion (Dubinsky 1998; Evans et al. 2002), examining these different perspectives could provide valuable insight for sales manager selection, career development, and job performance.

### RESEARCH METHOD: VALUE LADDERING

To add depth to our understanding of the attributes of effective sales managers and to explore why those characteristics are important, we selected the value-laddering technique as most appropriate for our research purposes (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Value laddering is a method for providing an in-depth understanding of the focal phenomena, in the case of this research—sales manager effectiveness. The method relies on means–end theory to investigate association networks among individual concepts as expressed by respondents (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Depending on where the concepts fall in each means–end chain, they are given the label of *attributes* (characteristics of a person or situation), *consequences* (reasons why the attribute is important to the individual), or *values* (end states that drive individuals with respect to real or ideal self-perception). Laddering combines both quantitative and qualitative aspects of investigation by using in-depth questioning to uncover specific ladder elements, content analysis to code elements as belonging to specific categories, a grouping mechanism to combine categories across multiple respondents, and a method for linking categories into a graphical representation of the data (Reynolds and Gutman 1988).

When using the value-laddering technique, researchers rely on a specific questioning methodology to uncover root needs and values important to respondents and to probe beyond a superficial discussion of attributes. As a result, value laddering allows researchers to develop means–end chains, or ladders, that delve far beyond a simplistic listing of characteristics. Such ladders allow researchers to investigate linkages among the attributes of the research topic, the consequences resulting from an individual possessing those attributes, and ultimately, the root values driving the presence of those attributes (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Our data collection and analysis procedures follow the guidelines of previous researchers (Gengler

and Reynolds 1993, 1995; Reynolds and Gutman 1988) and include (1) the probing of “why” each attribute is important in in-depth one-on-one interviews, (2) the linking of attributes to higher level consequences and values, (3) the “chunking” of data by multiple independent coders, (4) the aggregating of individual ladders across respondents, and (5) the drawing of hierarchical value maps (HVMs).

### Data Collection

Data were collected from a total of 58 sales professionals (33 sales managers and 25 sales representatives) through a focused in-depth interview process, which is the primary method of data collection used in value-laddering research. In-depth interviews are valuable in this setting because they allow informants to speak freely about their experiences, feelings, and attitudes and because the interview allows flexibility for the researcher to probe for elaboration from the respondents (Fontana and Frey 1994). A general rule in exploratory value-laddering research such as ours is to include a minimum of 20 respondents in order to obtain meaningful results (Reynolds, Dethloff, and Westberg 2001; Van Rekom, Van Riel, and Wierenga 2006). The number of sales managers (33) and sales representatives (25) interviewed for this study clearly surpasses the recommended minimum number of respondents for value-laddering studies.

Our value-laddering interviews lasted from 30 to 75 minutes and were audiotaped for later verbatim transcriptions. Trained interviewers followed a common structure of first asking respondents to identify five to eight characteristics or attributes of effective sales managers. Once those attributes were identified, interviewers asked respondents to rank each attribute in order of importance. The interviewer then began the interview process by selecting the attribute ranked first and asking about it. A value-laddering questioning sequence from our data is as follows:

- Interviewer: You listed communication skills as one of the most important attributes for a sales manager. Why is that important?
- Respondent: Because if a manager can communicate well, it makes me feel like I have the support I need to go about doing my job.
- Interviewer: And why is having this support from the manager important?
- Respondent: Well, in my mind, it helps set clear expectations for what the manager wants from me.
- Interviewer: And helping to set clear expectations is important because . . .
- Respondent: It provides focus for the types of things I need to concentrate on.
- Interviewer: What happens if you don't have this focus?

Respondent: I'm not as successful when I go out to make my sales calls, because I'm not concentrating on what is expected of me.

Interviewer: Why is it important that you have successful sales calls?

Respondent: Because that leads to success for the company and that's what we're here for.

As one can see, careful probes by the interviewer prompt the respondents to discuss why each attribute is important for the effective sales manager to possess. The follow-up “why” questions are routinely used in value-laddering interviews and are designed to prompt the respondent to identify the consequences of possessing the attribute and the desired end-state values associated with those attributes. From this probing, a much deeper understanding of the phenomena of interest emerges.

The respondents included in our sample represented a wide range of industries including office equipment and supplies, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and supplies, original equipment manufacturer parts, insurance/investments, television/advertising, food services, heavy equipment, and telecommunications/computer equipment. Seventy-three percent of the respondents were male with 81 percent possessing a bachelor's or master's degree. The greatest number of interviewees were between the ages of 30 and 39 (35 percent) with 28 percent between the ages of 20 and 29, 21 percent between 40 and 49, and 14 percent over the age of 50.

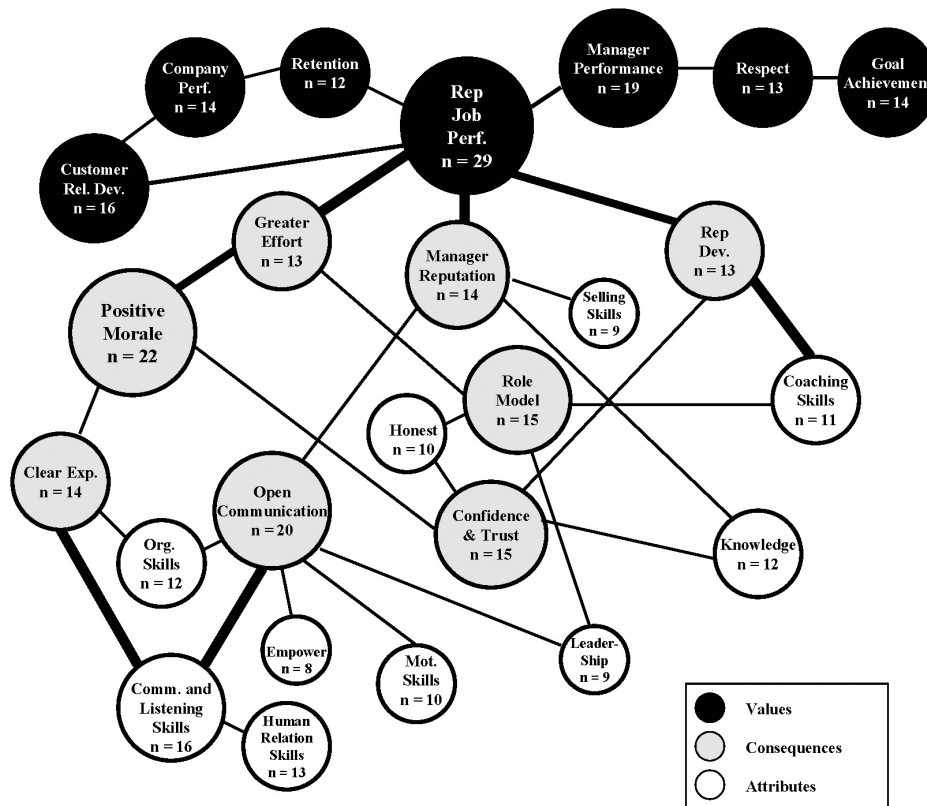
### Data Analysis

As prescribed by the value-laddering methodology, the transcribed interviews were content analyzed with attributes, consequences, and values coded to aid in data reduction, a necessary step for managing and analyzing interview data (Gengler and Reynolds 1995). Two independent judges assigned codes and a third judge, also independent, reviewed all coding and broke ties as needed. We developed our initial coding sheet from the findings of previous research on sales managers but the judges added codes as new ideas emerged from the data. LADDERMAP, a computer-assisted content analysis software, was used to help reduce coding inconsistencies (Gengler and Reynolds 1993).

We next aggregated data of individual ladders across respondents to develop an implications matrix. This matrix displays the number of times each code is linked to another code, reveals both direct and indirect relationships, and aids in developing linkages or ladders across respondents (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). The implications matrix forms the basis for drawing an HVM, a visual tool that illustrates the relationships among constructs (Gengler, Klenosky, and Mulvey 1995). The HVM illustrates linkages of attributes,



Figure 1  
Sales Manager Effectiveness Hierarchical Value Map: Sales Manager Perspective



consequences, and values through lines of varying thickness, with the thickness of the lines indicating the strength of the relationship—the thicker the line the stronger is the relationship between two variables. The HVM also reports variables in circles of varying sizes. The diameter of each circle reflects the relative frequency that respondents mentioned the variable; larger circles represent attributes, consequences, or values mentioned more frequently.

### DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Recall that the purpose of our study is to identify the attributes of effective sales managers as perceived by sales managers and sales representatives, and to explore differences in those perceptions. The results of our analysis undertaken to investigate these issues are presented in two HVMs, shown as Figures 1 and 2. The figures present a graphical representation of the results through the linkages displayed among the variables. Tables 1, 2, and 3 contain descriptions, characteristic comments, and respondent rankings for the attributes, consequences, and values, respectively. Reviewing the HVMs shown in Figure 1 (sales managers) and Figure 2 (sales representatives) reveals

many similarities and several critical differences that helps to accomplish the research purpose. A discussion of these results follows.

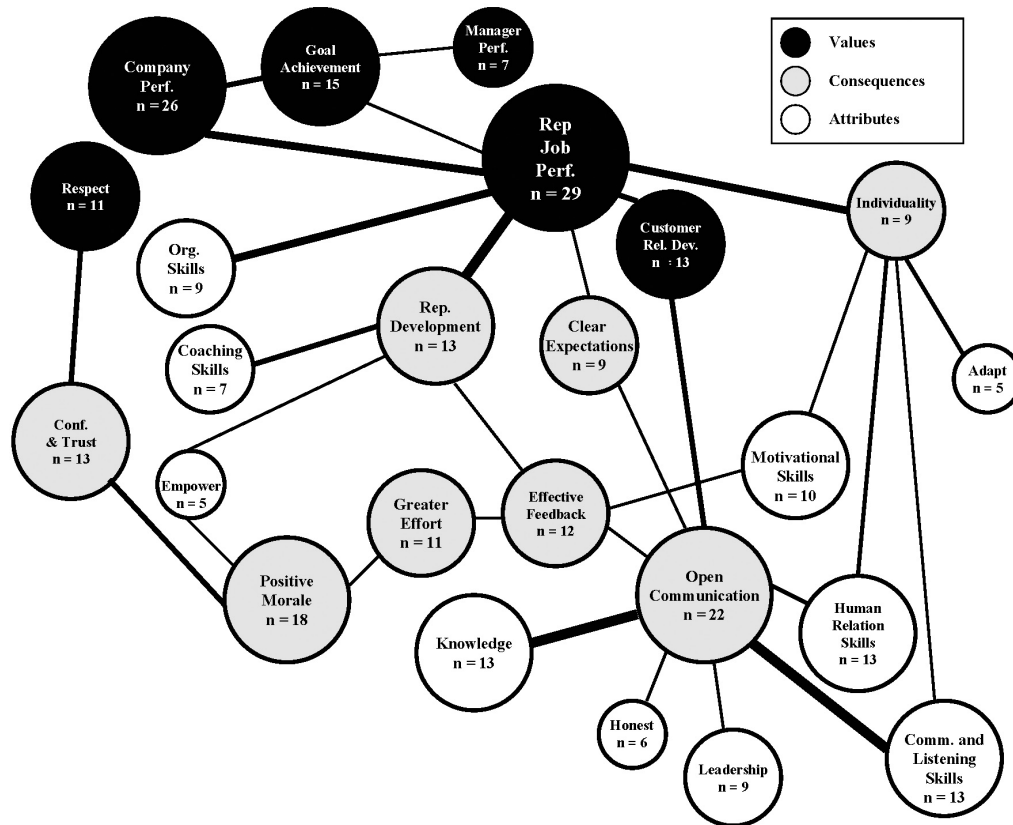
#### Differences in Attributes

The two groups of respondents in our sample generally had high agreement on the attributes an effective sales manager needs to possess. Nine out of 11 most frequently mentioned attributes were consistent. Some noticeable differences are worthy of discussion. These include differences in attributes as well as differences in interpretation. The primary differences in attributes relate to selling skills and adaptability. The primary differences in interpretation relate to organization and time management skills, knowledge possession, and communication and listening skills.

#### *Selling Skills*

The manager respondents in our sample indicated that their own selling skills contribute to others' perceptions of their credibility—that is, manager reputation (Figure 1 and Table 1). One sales manager noted:

Figure 2  
Sales Manager Effectiveness Hierarchical Value Map: Sales Representative Perspective



If . . . a sales manager doesn't know the business or certainly doesn't have salesmanship skills, they're going to fail in everything else. They won't have the credibility; they won't be believable.

This result suggests that the managers in our study believe their own selling skills play an important role in others' perceptions of managers' reputations. Sales managers have indicated in previous research that it is important for them to have good selling skills (Mehta et al. 1999). Other research in the management literature has identified the importance of credibility and manager reputation (Mackenzie 1969). However, our finding that sales managers need to have a well-documented reputation based partly on their possession of selling skills appears to be idiosyncratic to the sales managers in this study. As Table 1 indicates, no sales representative in our interviews directly discussed selling skills as an attribute of an effective sales manager.

This result may reflect the way sales representatives see their managers influencing the sales process. Because representatives rely on managers for support functions such as feedback and development, they may not see the manager's selling skills as necessary to the successful fulfillment of those support func-

tions. Alternatively, sales representatives may have assumed the manager would have selling skills and therefore did not deem those skills worthy of explicit mention. It is also possible that salespeople interpreted sales managers' selling skills as a component of another attribute, such as knowledge possession. Regardless of the possible motive for representatives to not mention selling skills as an essential attribute of sales managers, it is worth noting that sales representatives did not discuss manager reputation as a consequence arising from the attributes of effective sales managers.

#### Adaptability

Whereas sales managers identified selling skills as a somewhat important attribute, sales representatives mentioned the managers' adaptability as an attribute somewhat important to sales manager effectiveness. The following sales representative quotation illustrates the value of manager adaptability:

And maybe it's just not a good day. And maybe you need to tell him to hold back and try to ride with, work with somebody else. And a good manager, of course, is going to be flexible and know that, "Okay, today is not going to be a good day

**Table I**  
**Attributes**

Variable	Definition and Example Verbatim	Ranking by Managers*	Ranking by Representatives*
Communication and Listening Skills	The sales manager has the skills to communicate and listen effectively (e.g., "a sales manager today has to be an effective listener as well as communicator")	1	1
Human Relations Skills	The sales manager works with people effectively and develops personal rapport with sales force members (e.g., "the most important job of a manager is to be able to relate well with that sales team")	2	1
Organization and Time Management Skills	The sales manager has the ability to organize and manage his or her own time and work activities (e.g., "understanding organization, understanding delegation, time management")	3	5
Knowledge Possession	The sales manager is knowledgeable about the industry, the product, and business in general (e.g., "if you don't have a good understanding of how the industry works, then you really don't know how to answer the question")	3	1
Coaching Skills	The sales manager mentors representatives, helping them improve their selling skills (e.g., "you need to constantly make sure those individuals are improving their skills")	5	7
Motivational Skills	The sales manager recognizes motivating factors and rewards good performance (e.g., "important for the sales force to be rewarded or recognized and noticed for the work they're doing")	6	4
Honest and Ethical Tendencies	The sales manager is perceived as truthful, straightforward, and ethical (e.g., "as a manager you have to be honest with the people that work for you")	6	8
Selling Skills	The sales manager has sales experience (e.g., "he's been there, done that, he knows what it's like to be in the trenches")	8	n.l.
Leadership Skills	The sales manager encourages and inspires reps (e.g., "sales associates need to be able to look to a sales manager as a leader")	8	5
Willingness to Empower	The sales manager allows reps to take responsibility and action (e.g., "empower the employees to accomplish their goals however they choose")	10	9
Adaptability	The sales manager is adaptable (e.g., "if he's not flexible, then things will get mucked up")	n.l.	9

Notes: \* Attributes with the same ranking reflect a tie in the number of times it was listed as important by respondents. n.l. = not listed as an attribute.

and I'm not going to push it and not going to interfere with his productivity."

From this quotation and others, it appears that the sales representatives in our study are more focused on adaptability as a means to enhance the salesperson's productivity. In other words, the representatives prefer that the sales manager be adaptable when it comes to providing guidance and supporting the completion of the sales representatives' job responsibilities. Sales managers, in contrast, did not identify adaptability as an attribute related to effective sales management. One possible explanation may be that sales managers considered adaptability to be a component of another attribute, such as human rela-

tions skills. Another explanation may be that adaptability is seen clearly by managers as an attribute critical for effective selling, but not for effective management of salespeople. In fact, although the management literature often calls for the development of managers who can adapt to change (e.g., Farley 2005), we could find no evidence that adaptability had been identified as an attribute important to effectively managing relationships with employees. Just as the literature supports that adapting selling behavior to the needs of different buyers is important to achieving superior sales performance (e.g., Spiro and Weitz 1990), the salespeople in our sample seem to suggest that adaptive management also is important to sales manager effectiveness.

**Table 2**  
**Consequences**

Variable	Definition and Example Verbatim	Ranking by Managers*	Ranking by Representatives*
Positive Morale	The sales reps perceive the workplace as a positive environment and exhibit high morale (e.g., "really working to have a better environment")	1	2
Open Communication	The reps can communicate openly with the sales manager and find him or her supportive (e.g., "they feel they are heard and supported")	2	1
Role Model	The sales manager is seen as a model for sales reps (e.g., "you really have to set the example")	3	n.l.
Confidence and Trust	The sales manager instills confidence in and develops trust with sales force members (e.g., "they need to know they can trust you")	3	3
Clear Expectations	The sales reps have a clear understanding of their roles and what is expected of them (e.g., "people have a clear understanding of what is expected")	5	7
Manager Reputation	How the sales manager is perceived by others (e.g., "first downfall of a sales manager is the perception")	5	n.l.
Rep Development	The selling skills and abilities of sales reps are developed and improved (e.g., "help them develop their skills")	7	3
Greater Effort	The sales reps are willing to work harder (e.g., "they're ready to run to the wall for you")	7	6
Effective Feedback	The sales manager provides feedback in an effectual manner (e.g., "you're going to get your point across")	n.l.	5
Recognition of Individuality	The sales manager recognizes and deals effectively with the varying traits of individual sales representatives (e.g., "ability to deal with different types of personalities")	n.l.	7

*Notes:* \* Consequences with the same ranking reflect a tie in the number of times it was listed as important by respondents. n.l. = not listed as a consequence.

### *Organization and Time Management Skills*

Although relatively close agreement was achieved regarding the remaining attributes considered important to effective sales management, there appears to be less agreement as to *why* these attributes are important. Both sales managers and sales representatives identified organization and time management skills as important, a finding corroborated by previous research (Spencer 1972). Sales managers saw organization and time management skills as allowing the time needed to openly communicate and relay expectations to their representatives (Figure 1). One sales manager in the real estate industry expresses this idea:

And that [organization] . . . comes into play certainly with being efficient in his own planning . . . if he's efficient in trying to organize the staff, to encourage them to get out and make themselves known to the community or whatever, everybody's going to benefit . . . he could certainly establish policies and certainly make suggestions that would encourage the staff people to be more efficient and use their time more efficiently.

On the other hand, salespeople saw organization and time management skills of the sales manager as important because they contribute directly to the representatives' job performance by removing internal or external obstacles that may prevent effective performance (Figure 2). One sales representative, when asked what would happen if a sales manager did not have good organizational skills, responded:

I think I might be frustrated. I have worked for managers before where it was like that. Where they didn't remember what you talked about, they'd say they'd do something, and they'd never follow up. I'd be like, 'shoot, I have to go through this again,' you know. Or maybe you went through all this trouble, you put something together and you gave it to him and he lost it. You know, and you have to go back and, hopefully, you would have kept a copy . . . in some cases some people don't, they give him the original and the next thing you know they have to do it all over again.

It appears that the sales representatives in our study consider the importance of organization and time management skills



**Table 3**  
**Values**

Variable	Definition and Example Verbatim	Ranking by Managers*	Ranking by Representatives*
Rep Job Performance	The sales representative is productive and contributes to company success (e.g., "More productive and aggressive sales force")	1	1
Manager Job Performance	The sales manager fulfills the requirements of the position (e.g., "sales manager can be successful")	2	6
Customer Relationship Development and Retention	Relationships with customers are developed and maintained (e.g., "form a relationship with your client")	3	4
Company Performance	The company attains success (e.g., "help the company be more profitable")	4	2
Goal Achievement	Set goals are attained (e.g., "meeting all the company's objectives")	4	3
Respect	The sales manager earns the respect of the sales force (e.g., "to earn the respect of the people that you're leading and/or managing")	6	5
Sales Force Retention	Sales force turnover is reduced (e.g., "then you'll lose the person")	7	n.l.

*Notes:* \* Values with the same ranking reflect a tie in the number of times it was listed as important by respondents. n.l. = not listed as a value.

in terms of sales support. A manager who possesses good organization and time management skills is in a position to make it easier for the representative to sell and execute other tasks in an efficient manner. Alternatively, our sales managers see themselves playing a more active role in the sales process, modeling and encouraging appropriate behavior. From the manager's perspective, organization and time management skills allow the manager more time to interact with representatives and influence the sales process more directly.

#### *Knowledge Possession: Links to Consequences*

Our findings also demonstrated differences in the interpretation of knowledge possession. Both the sales manager and sales representative respondents defined knowledge possession in terms of industry knowledge, product knowledge, and general business knowledge. The differences in these two groups of respondents lie in the relationships between knowledge possession and subsequent consequences. As illustrated by the thickness of the line in the HVMs in Figures 1 and 2, the sales representatives in this study see sales manager knowledge as contributing directly to open communication, whereas the sales managers see their possession of knowledge leading to two consequences—confidence and trust and manager reputation. With respect to sales representatives, the finding that knowledge possession leads to open communication may reflect salespeople's reliance on sales managers as a supportive resource, including an important source of knowledge

(Dubinsky 1999). This idea is exemplified by this quotation from an office products sales representative:

You expect your sales manager to have been around for a while. Knows the business, knows how to handle people, knows how to handle certain situations, knows about the company that you're working for. He knows about the product line that you're selling. So there's a responsibility there for the manager to know a lot of information so that you can use them as a resource. . . . That helps me because I feel comfortable going to him.

This example illustrates the link between knowledge and open communication, which occurs when representatives feel that they can communicate openly with their managers and receive support from those managers when needed (Table 1).

On the other hand, as shown in Figure 1, the sales managers linked knowledge possession to confidence and trust and manager reputation. If the sales manager possesses and shares detailed knowledge with a sales representative, then that could increase the confidence the salesperson has in his or her manager, as well as his or her trust in that manager. Given that the manager is seen as a credible source of knowledge, manager reputation could also be enhanced. These linkages are noted by one sales manager in a discussion about product knowledge:

You need to learn about the products that you're selling before you can actually go out there. You can manage, you can be in the office and be the out-of-desk-type management where

something comes across your desk, you sign it . . . you have no concept of what the products are all about. If you're out there and you know what your products are, it makes it a lot easier to sell. And you get back to credibility not only with your salespeople but also with your customers if you know your product.

The themes of indirect supporter versus active participant seem to be driving the different perceptions. The sales representatives in our study see a knowledgeable manager as a resource in more of a supportive role, whereas the sales managers see their knowledge as contributing to the confidence of the representative and the manager's reputation, thereby influencing the selling process more directly.

#### *Communication and Listening Skills: Links to Consequences*

Both managers and representatives view communication and listening skills on the part of the manager as an important precursor to the consequence of open communication. The managers in our sample believe that communication and listening skills lead to the establishment of clear expectations with his or her representatives. The representatives, however, view the communication and listening skills as antecedent to recognition of the representatives' individuality. This excerpt from one sales manager in the office supply industry illustrates how her communication helps solidify expectations with her representatives:

I think it [communication and listening skills] makes their job easier. They don't have to second guess or, "Gosh, what did she mean by that?" Maybe not accomplish certain tasks by certain deadlines because they didn't understand what needed to be done. So I think a clear explanation of what your expectation is, is important.

Contrasted with the previous quote, in the following passage a sales representative discusses how her manager's communication and listening skills recognize the representatives' individuality:

In my experience, personally, the sales reps I've worked with [her peers], they can have interesting personalities and the manager has to know how to communicate with those personalities without ruffling feathers and yet still get their point across.

Once again, through the communication of clear expectations, the managers in our sample see themselves as playing an active part in the sales representative's tasks. In contrast, the sales representatives view the managers' communication and listening skills as recognition that the representatives are individuals and, as such, they expect personalized communication from their managers.

#### *Summary*

An overview of the differences with respect to the important attributes of effective sales managers and the linkages of those attributes to various consequences highlights a recurring theme—sales representatives see the manager in a support role of the selling process and sales managers see themselves in a more active, direct role.

#### **Differences in Consequences**

As with the attributes, differences in consequences between sales managers and representatives include differences in the consequences and differences in the interpretation of those consequences. The differences in consequences include role model, effective feedback, manager reputation, clear expectations, and recognition of individuality. The primary differences in interpretation relate to positive morale and greater effort.

#### *Role Model*

The sales managers in our study see role modeling, defined as their ability to set an example for representatives, as playing a key role in the effort put forth by salespeople. This greater effort is subsequently seen as affecting representative job performance. Although little attention has been paid to role modeling by sales researchers (Rich 1998), this finding certainly seems intuitive and is supported by practitioner-oriented sales literature (e.g., Richardson 1996). This idea is exemplified by the following quotation from a sales manager in the industrial equipment industry:

Salesmen have to have somebody they can look to. . . . Somebody who they can be proud of, that understands the product reasonably well. That they can look to and say, "Yeah, if I'm going to be like anybody in the company and for success, and move forward, yeah, that's the person."

This verbatim suggests that when the sales manager is a role model, the salesperson will work to be more like the manager. Interestingly, role model was not a consequence identified by the sales representatives in our study. This result may reflect sales representatives' perceptions that the sales manager plays a different role than that played by the representative. To the extent that a sales representative sees the sales manager as a supportive resource, he or she may not recognize that manager as a role model for the sales representative function.

#### *Effective Feedback*

The sales representatives in our sample were more inclined to see effective feedback as critical to the development of their selling skills. The thoughts of one sales representative discuss-

ing a sales manager in the following quotation illustrates this relationship:

For example, when we do evaluations, he'll sit down and we'll discuss what we need to do. And he'll tell you why. He'll make you think about things you don't normally think about. . . . My previous manager would tell everybody else behind my back except me. So I'd rather he tell me because I can improve myself if I know what I'm doing wrong.

This sales representative believes direct feedback received is important to his personal development. Other sales representatives reported that this feedback allows them to develop their skills (representative development) and subsequently perform at higher levels. This finding is different than the previously discussed manager results, which suggest the sales managers believe being a positive role model leads to enhanced representative job performance. Given that the provision of feedback to sales representatives is a core sales management function, it seems curious that sales managers did not identify this consequence. A possible explanation for this result is that sales managers saw feedback as a component of another consequence, such as open communication. An alternative explanation is that sales managers saw role modeling as a means to provide the information needed to promote sales person job performance.

#### *Manager Reputation*

The identification of manager reputation as an important consequence is interesting because we could find no prior research in the sales literature discussing this construct. As indicated by the thickness of the line joining manager reputation and representative job performance on the sales manager map (Figure 1), the managers in our sample reported relatively strong links with this consequence:

They're constantly looking at you and everything you do, both socially, in meetings. Your credibility, in all environments, your credibility can be perfect and you can destroy it in making the wrong comment in the wrong environment . . . and from then on you don't get invited into the sales process and then you're always behind the curve.

Clearly, this sales manager is concerned with her credibility and how the perceptions of the sales representatives within her span of control can be affected by her choices in conversation and behavior. Perhaps even more interesting is the link identified by sales managers between manager reputation and sales representative job performance, which is a finding that reiterates the view that the sales manager affects the selling process directly.

#### *Clear Expectations and Recognition of Individuality*

Although sales managers see manager reputation as a direct link to representative job performance, sales representatives see clear expectations and the recognition of individuality as being linked to representative job performance. One sales representative stated the importance of clear expectations:

A lot of times a salesperson in the field is doing battle, if you will, on their own. And if certain things are required from that salesperson from the company that they work for, it's just important for the sales manager to be honest about "Hey, this is why it's important." All types of things are important about the communication the manager has with the salesperson. Inclusive of what expectations and goals are and how they're stacking up against those expectations and goals.

This quotation suggests that salespeople look to their sales managers for clear standards of performance—that is, clear expectations. Another salesperson highlighted the importance of recognizing individuality:

And I think that it's just important to understand the individual so that way the sales manager can sort of . . . personalize it to each individual salesperson and their personality and what motivates them so that way he or she can maximize that person's ability.

As evidenced by this passage, the sales representative respondents in our sample suggest that in addition to possessing certain skills, such as motivational skills, human relations skills, communication and listening skills, and adaptability (Figure 2), the sales manager should be capable of applying those skills in a way that recognizes the salesperson's individuality. Taken together, these results suggest that sales representatives believe the ability of the manager to support the representative, through the clarification of expectations and the recognition that each salesperson has different needs, is important to each sales representative's job performance.

Our sales managers did not identify individuality as a key consequence and although clear expectations was identified as a consequence by sales managers, it was seen as influencing representative job performance indirectly through positive morale and greater effort. This result suggests the sales managers in our sample do not recognize treating salespeople as individuals as an important consequence that might ultimately affect job performance. Perhaps sales managers identified the ability to treat salespeople as individuals with another consequence or attribute such as human relations skills. The alternative explanation with respect to clear expectations suggests managers see a more complex process between clear expectations and representative job performance. This result may stem from the fact that sales managers are working with a group of

salespeople rather than a single salesperson. This finding may also illustrate the difficulty that sales managers face in balancing the expectations of the firm with salesperson outcomes. With these complexities in mind, the manager could be in a better position to understand how clear expectations could affect sales force morale as a whole.

#### *Positive Morale and Greater Effort*

Another interesting difference between the perceptions of the sales managers and sales representatives in our study is how each group views the relationship between the consequences of positive morale and greater effort with the value of representative job performance (Figure 1). The managers view themselves as having a much more direct influence on a representative's job performance through the establishment of positive morale, which leads to greater effort by the sales representative and enhanced representative job performance. The sales representatives view their own greater effort as only obliquely related to their own job performance. Based on these findings, it appears that the managers believe that better job performance on the part of the representative is the result of the representatives working harder (through greater effort), which the managers influence through positive morale, and as helping their representatives work smarter (through representative development). In contrast, representatives believe that their own performance is the result of their working smarter through (1) the development of representative selling skills, (2) the establishment of clear expectations, and (3) the ability of the manager to deal with representatives on an individual basis.

#### *Summary*

As with the differences in attributes, the differences in perceptions regarding the importance of various consequences reflect what appears to be a key theme underlying our research findings. Sales managers see themselves as more directly involved in the sales process, whereas salespeople see the manager as an indirect support mechanism.

#### **Differences in Values**

With respect to the values or desired end-states seen as resulting from key attributes and consequences, we observed more similarities than differences among sales managers and sales representatives. Both groups consistently highlighted the sales representative's job performance as the most important desired end-state. In addition, both groups discussed manager job performance, company performance, goal achievement, respect, and customer relationship development and retention

as important values, although the frequency with which these values were mentioned varied. The primary differences between managers and representatives relate to manager job performance and sales force retention.

#### *Manager Job Performance*

One interesting difference between the managers and representatives in our sample is the identification of manager performance as an important value. Sales representatives, by virtue of the low number of times manager performance is mentioned (only seven times) and its position in the map, view manager performance as somewhat of an afterthought resulting from the representative achieving his or her goals. Conversely, managers view fulfilling their job requirements as a much more important and central value to the process. Managers seem to believe that their performance allows them to receive respect from the sales force, which, in turn, results in goal achievement for the manager. This is represented in the following comment from a sales manager in the office equipment industry:

I am held accountable for a specific budget every year. I hold my salespeople accountable for making their budget. If they don't make their budget, I won't make mine. . . . And so if my salespeople see that I'm trying my hardest and making every effort to make sure that I deliver mine, they will in turn deliver theirs.

It appears that the managers in this study view their own contributions in a more important fashion, whereas the sales representatives do not give the manager as much credit for the central role that he or she plays in accomplishing the goals of the sales force. Perhaps sales managers recognize that their performance affects those both above and below them, whereas sales representatives view the sales manager's performance in an individualistic way.

#### *Sales Force Retention*

Only sales managers identified sales force retention as a critical value. Understandably, sales managers are more likely to be concerned with turnover, given the costs for recruiting, training, and managing a new sales trainee, as well as the potential costs associated with lost sales resulting from the turnover (Futrell and Parasuraman 1984). The fact that the sales representatives in our study did not identify sales force retention as a key value is not surprising. Although logic suggests a sales representative might be interested in his or her intention to remain in a position, he or she would likely view overall sales force retention as unimportant to his or her position and ability to perform.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS AND MANAGERS

This research sought to investigate the factors related to sales manager effectiveness from both the sales manager and salesperson perspectives. Our goal was to identify characteristics of effective sales managers, link those characteristics to the resultant consequences, and explore the values underlying the consequences from two points of view—that of the sales representative and the sales manager. Use of the value-laddering methodology in an exploratory research design allowed for the development of two HVMs, one each for sales managers and sales representatives, illustrating the linkages among the attributes, consequences, and values demonstrated by effective sales managers. As highlighted throughout our discussion, many similarities exist between the results obtained for both sales managers and sales representatives. Some key differences also are present. Throughout our analysis, a key theme emerged—that of sales managers viewing their role as more participative in the selling process while sales representatives view the sales manager's role as more supportive in nature.

### Implications for Researchers

The exploratory nature of this study naturally leads to multiple ideas for future research. As a cross between qualitative and quantitative research, the value-laddering methodology has facilitated the development of two HVMs representing the perceptions of sales managers and sales representatives. In essence, these maps represent models that might be tested using alternative research methods. Given the comprehensive nature of the maps, we recommend testing components of the models as a first step. A test of the relationships surrounding open communication, for example, might represent a good starting point. Confirmatory methods may provide more definitive evidence of the nature of the relationships among the attributes, consequences, and values we identified.

Future research also should examine the key theme of “support” versus “direct influence.” In addition to confirming or refuting our findings, research should explore more fully why sales managers see directly influencing the sales process as more indicative of performing their job effectively and why sales representatives perceive the support role as more important. It also would be interesting to investigate the views from top management. Under what conditions is it preferable to have the sales manager directly involved, and when is it preferable to have the manager serve as a supportive resource?

We did not distinguish between levels of sales managers when conducting our interviews. Research on sales management training has suggested that differences between lower-level and upper-level managers can exist. In a study of satisfaction with sales manager training, Dubinsky, Mehta,

and Anderson (2001) found that certain aspects of training program content, such as company knowledge, company policies, and time management, appeared to be more important to lower-level sales managers than upper-level sales managers. Perhaps different HVMs might be attained depending on the level of management measured.

With the exception of early research in the organizational behavior literature (Mackenzie 1969), we could find no research examining the manager reputation consequence identified in our study. Our results suggest this is a concern of sales managers but not sales representatives. Future research might explore the nature of this construct more fully. Some potential research questions include the following: Does manager reputation play a role in relationships with customers? Do sales representatives identify manager reputation with another variable, such as respect? Is manager reputation important to top management? Given the prominence of this construct in the sales manager HVM, additional research is warranted.

Finally, this research also points to a need for more investigation of the sales manager's role in the selling process and the factors related to sales manager job performance. Recent research suggests women may manage differently from men (Piercy, Cravens, and Lane 2003). Perhaps male and female sales managers/sales representatives would view the subject of sales manager effectiveness differently than is presented here. The relationship between manager job performance and representative job performance has received little attention in the literature and represents another possible avenue for research.

### Implications for Managers

Although our research is exploratory and warrants further investigation, these findings have notable points for sales organizations to consider. Our results suggest that sales managers and sales representatives view sales manager effectiveness differently. Sales organizations should recognize that when defining effective sales management, it is worth considering the sales representatives' perspective. If sales force retention is an issue in a particular firm, for instance, the sales organization might be well served by seeking out the types of attributes possessed by a sales manager capable of being a supportive resource. The key theme of supportive resource versus direct influence underlying our research suggests sales organizations will need to make a determination as to the role they want sales managers to play in their firms. Does a firm want sales managers who serve as “super closers,” taking over for the sales representative to bring sales into the organization? In contrast, does a firm seek managers who will develop the selling skills of sales representatives and support representatives' efforts throughout the customer relationship development process? The strategy chosen has clear implications for the expectations



and actions of both sales managers and sales representatives. A clearly identified strategy will facilitate an accurate job description that can lead to the hiring of the right person for the sales management position (Cron and DeCarlo 2006).

Our findings also highlight content areas that could be considered for incorporation in sales management training programs. When a firm seeks supportive managers, for example, our results provide some evidence that managers might be less concerned with demonstrating their own selling skills. Instead, more emphasis might be placed on the ability of the sales manager to adapt his or her management style and recognize the individual needs of each salesperson. In addition, because good organization and time management skills may result in more time available to support sales representatives, those topics also could be emphasized in sales manager training programs. Given that sales managers did not identify effective feedback as a key consequence, it may be important to teach managers that sales representatives see effective feedback as important to their own development. In general, sales managers will benefit from an understanding of how certain skills can result in consequences that create a more supportive environment in which sales representatives are more likely to succeed.

### LIMITATIONS

The value-laddering methodology used in this study provided a more in-depth understanding of manager and representative perceptions of sales manager effectiveness. As such, this study represents an exploratory step in a slowly emerging understanding of the characteristics of effective sales managers. We utilized a convenience sample of sales managers and sales representatives, however, and our results are not generalizable. In addition, other research approaches that test the relationships shown in the HVMS with a more quantitative design may be a logical next step.

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