Ethical Climate's Influence on Sales Management Practices

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Ethical salesforce behavior plays a critical role in developing customer relationships and enhancing individual and firm performance. As such, determining means by which organizations can influence sales managers, who in turn can shape the ethicalness of the salesforce, can provide insights for developing strategy to improve customer relationships and ultimately the firm's performance. We examined the ethical hiring, training and managing practices of 240 sales managers to determine the influence of the firm's ethical climate on these practices via managers' understanding of ethical violations. The results suggest that ethical climate influences sales managers' ethical violation understanding, which subsequently impacts their ethical hiring, training and managing practices. The study provides implications for theory and practice.

For well over a decade, relationship marketing has been heralded as a paradigm for success. It involves marketing activities conducted to create, nurture and sustain successful ongoing exchange (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Salespeople play a critical role in helping to establish relationships by being customer oriented (Beverland 2001; Leigh and Marshall 2001; Swanson, Kelley and Dorsch 1997; Williams 1998) which involves displaying integrity and avoiding deceptive and dishonest practices (Saxe and Weitz 1982). It has been suggested that one of the most significant leadership challenges facing field sales managers in the 21st century is promoting customer-oriented role behavior (Ingram et al. 2005). The need for appropriate moral behavior in establishing customer relationships takes on added significance in light of recent scandals, and the call to be "more ethical" (Jones et al. 2005, p. 109). Given evidence that ethical behavior also enhances both salesperson (Schwepker and Ingram 1996) and organizational (Barles et al. 2002; Verschoor 1999, 2003) performance, it appears that improving the ethical behavior of salespeople is a worthwhile strategy.

Ethical climate has been suggested as one the most manageable factors for influencing ethical behavior in the salesforce (Schwepker, Ferrell and Ingram 1997; Vardi 2001). Ethical climate, created by ethical codes and policies, can influence behavior consistent with a customer orientation (Schwepker and Good 2004a). While it has received some attention, a complete understanding of its role in sales organizations is unknown. Studies finding positive relationships between ethical climate and ethical behavior have examined retail jewelry salespeople (Wimbush, Shepard and Markham 1997), college of business alumni (Peterson 2002), human resource managers (Bartels et al. 1998), managers and subordinates in a metal-products company (Vardi 2001), lodging properties employees (Upchurch and Ruhland 1996), and salespeople in the Netherlands (Verbeke, Ouwerkerk and Peelen 1996). Verbeke, Ouwerkerk and Peelen's (1996) study of salespeople (the type of which was unidentified) found a positive relationship between ethical climate (measured as salespeople's perceptions of colleagues' ethicality) and ethical decision making (salespeople's response to ethical scenarios). More recently, Schwepker and Good (2007a) found a positive relationship between ethical climate and sales manager ethical attitudes. Schwepker and Good (2004a) also found ethical climate to be negatively related to sales manager's probability of allowing salespeople to behave unethically. Since organizations tend to establish controls (e.g., ethical codes) commonly used to create an ethical climate, a better understanding of how climate can influence behaviors necessary for creating a more ethical

salesforce would be useful. To this end, we focus on climate's impact on important sales manager behaviors directed at creating a more ethical salesforce. Rather than looking at the direct relationship between climate and these behaviors, however, we examine the mediating impact of ethical violation understanding on sales manager behaviors.

As outlined in Figure 1, we propose that ethical climate will indirectly influence sales manager hiring, training and managing practices through sales managers' understanding of what is considered an ethical violation. Some research shows that ethical climate can impact sales manager ethical hiring practices through its impact on sales manager ethical attitudes (Schwepker and Good 2007a). Although attitudes and understanding may be related, the two differ. An attitude is one's mental position

toward an event, person or subject that influences their perceptions, feelings, learning processes and subsequent behaviors (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Typically, some degree of understanding is associated with attitude formation given that attitude includes a cognitive component (Bagozzi et al. 1979). Thus, studying "ethical understanding" provides a means for more clearly comprehending how ethical climate affects ethical behavior.

Examining important sales management activities (i.e., ethical hiring, training and managing) related to building a more ethical salesforce could provide useful insights. We know that ethical hiring practices can lead to a salesforce that is both more ethical (Schwepker and Good 2007a) and customer oriented (Schwepker and Good 2004b), thus clearly understanding the impact of ethical climate on

Figure 1
Hypothesized Relationships Among Study Variables
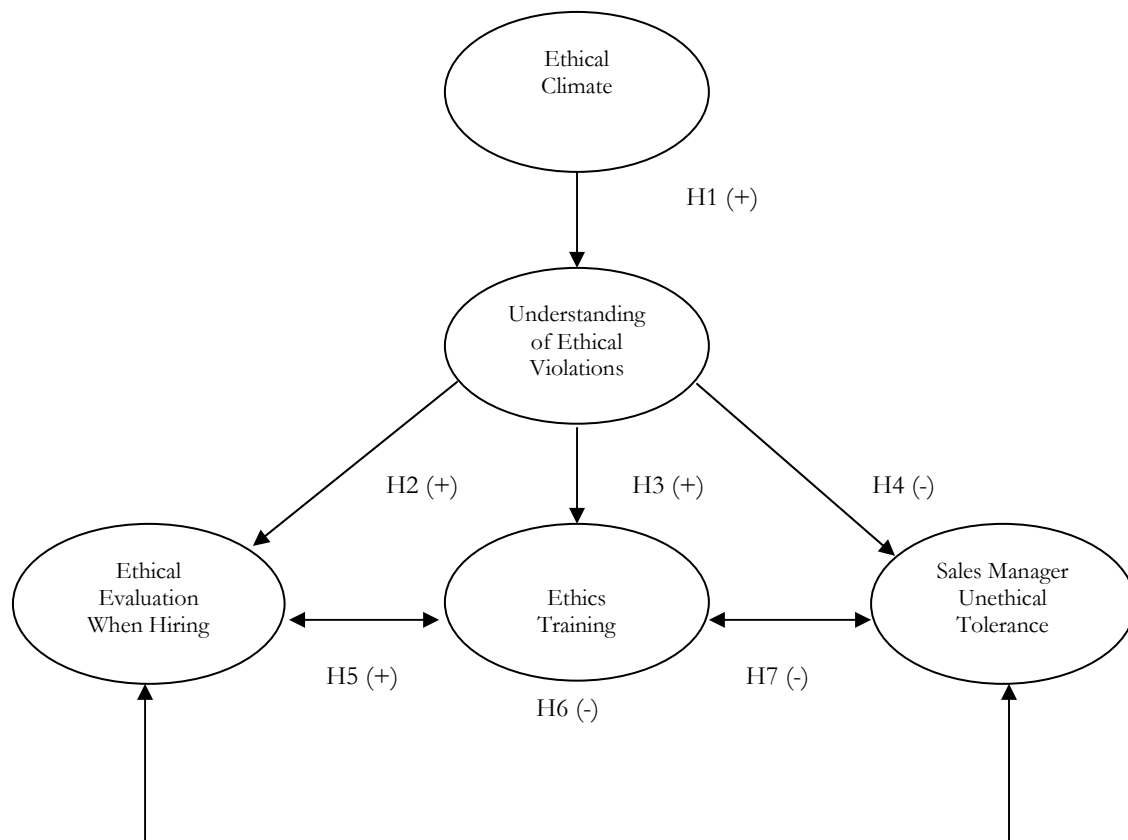
ethical violation understanding could prove beneficial to creating an environment that influences sales managers to participate in ethical hiring practices. Furthermore, since sales training has a significant impact on an organization's performance and profits (cf. Ingram et al. 2006), it would be useful to better understand the relationship between ethical climate and ethical training, a specific type of sales training. Finally, given management's ability to influence ethical decision making amongst subordinates (e.g., Dubinsky and Loken 1989; Ferrell and Gresham 1985), we also examine the relationship between ethical climate and sales manager behaviors regarding ethical issues in the salesforce.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to more clearly understand the relationships among the firm's ethical climate, ethical violation understanding, and ethical hiring, training and managing practices (see Figure 1), with the belief that such knowledge could be helpful to organization's wanting to improve the ethicalness of their salesforce and ultimately improve their chances of building long-term effective customer relationships. Our findings could contribute to our understanding of ethical decision making theory (Ferrell and Gresham 1985) by more clearly identifying the impact of ethical climate on the decisions/behaviors of sales managers, as well as sales managers' role in influencing ethical behavior. Further, our findings also could provide additional support for ethical control as an aspect of marketing control theory (Jaworski 1988). Finally, knowledge from this study can be used to help firms take actions to create a more ethical workplace and avoid prosecution under the U.S. Sentencing Commission's guidelines (United States Sentencing Commission 2004).

We begin by exploring the theoretical background for the proposed hypotheses. This is followed by an explanation of the research methodology and results. Finally, we discuss managerial and theoretical implications, as well as the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Two theories, marketing control (Jaworski 1988) and ethical decision making (Ferrell and Gresham 1985), provide the foundation for the hypothesized model depicted in Figure 1. In his examination of control theory, Jaworski (1988) identifies two major types of control, formal and informal. In this study, we focus only on formal control. With formal control, management designs methods to influence employee and/or group behavior in an attempt to support the firm's objectives. Employee training, strategic planning, discipline/rewards, structure, resource allocations, operating procedures, and performance standards characterize this type of control.

Ethical climate is treated as the principal formal control mechanism in our model and is comprised of employee perceptions of ethical codes of conduct, ethical policies and their enforcement, as well as punishment for unethical behavior. Research suggests a positive relationship between these formal controls and ethical behavior (Ferrell and Gresham 1985). Organizations have the capacity to diminish the opportunity for unethical behavior of employees by establishing an ethical climate (Ferrell and Gresham 1985). Actions taken to create an ethical climate communicate expected employee behavior and make it undesirable to participate in unethical behavior. In our model, we expect ethical climate to influence sales managers' understanding of ethical violations. Moreover, as outlined in Ferrell and Gresham's (1985) model of ethical decision making, we expect significant others (i.e., sales managers) to influence salespeople's ethical behavior by either letting or not letting salespeople commit an unethical act. Recent research confirms that sales managers' behaviors can influence the ethical behavior of salespeople (Jelinek and Ahearne 2006). Furthermore, we expect sales managers to likewise influence ethical behavior in the salesforce through ethics training and ethical hiring. In summary, our study emphasizes the important role of both formal control (i.e., ethical climate created via policies, codes

and punishment) and significant others (i.e., sales manager actions) in creating an ethical salesforce.

Ethical Climate and Ethical Understanding

Climate refers to shared perceptions regarding policies and procedures (Schneider 1975), and to the behaviors that are expected, supported and rewarded by organizations (Schneider and Rentsch 1988). The climate of a sales organization has been related to key seller behaviors such as motivation (Tyagi 1982), customer orientation (Schwepker and Good 2004b) and reward systems (Tyagi 1985). In this study, ethical climate is viewed as organizational members' perceptions of the ethical values and behaviors supported and practiced by its members. When ethical values and behaviors are encouraged and supported more ethical behavior is anticipated to exist (Bartels et al. 1998; Upchurch and Ruhland 1996; Wimbush and Shepard 1994). However, in climates that are neither clear nor ethical the chance for unethical behavior is greater (Peterson 2002; Sims 1994; Vardi 2001).

Several factors influence organizational members' perceptions of their firm's ethical climate. Climate, in part, can be shaped by the firm's structure (Schneider and Reichers 1983). One formalized structural element shaping organizational members' climate perceptions is a written code of ethics. Ethical codes are generally used to define problematic and preferred behaviors (Weaver 1993) and clarify intra-organizational roles and expectations (Brothers 1991). Although some have questioned the effectiveness of codes in preventing unethical behavior (Tsalikis and Fritzsche 1989), they have proven to be effective when enforced (Ferrell and Skinner 1988; Laczniak and Inderrieden 1987). Similarly, corporate goals and stated policies regarding ethical behavior can shape members' ethical climate perceptions and ethical behavior (Bommer et al. 1987; Hegarty and Sims 1979).

Rewards and punishment provide another means for influencing ethical behavior and shaping the firm's ethical climate (Hegarty and Sims 1978; Posner and Schmidt 1987). Not only can appropriately distributed discipline lead to a correction of behavior (Podsakoff 1982), but even the threat of punishment can affect one's decision to act ethically/unethically through its effects on one's perception of probable consequences and the desirability of these consequences (Podsakoff 1982). In summary, research suggests that an organization can diminish the chance of its members' unethical choices (as defined by the organization) by establishing an ethical climate via ethical codes, ethical policies, and rewards/punishments (Schwepker, Ferrell, and Ingram 1997).

Previous research has shown a relationship between ethical climate and management behavior (Bommer et al. 1987; Hegarty and Sims 1979), and more specifically ethical climate and sales managers' behavior (Schwepker and Good 2004a). Although Schwepker and Good (2004a) found ethical climate to directly impact sales managers' willingness to allow salespeople to act unethically, we believe that ethical climate may impact such behavior through its effects on sales managers' ethical understanding. It should be noted that perceptions of an ethical climate do not automatically imply ethical understanding. An individual may be *aware* that his or her firm has ethical codes and policies in place but may not fully understand them. By more clearly understanding how climate impacts salesforce behaviors, organizations will be in a better position to create a more ethical salesforce.

We expect the firm's ethical climate to have a positive influence on sales managers' understanding of ethical violations. However, this relationship has received little attention. Nevertheless, there is some indication that it exists. In a study of front-line boundary spanning service employees, enforcement of ethical codes led to internalization of codes (Schwepker and Hartline 2005). Internalization occurs when employees take on norms or rules as "their own" through an experiential learning process, thus modifying their behavior (Grundstein-Amado 2001). Such internalization is an outcome of other controls in use, such as enforcement of ethical codes and policies (Schwepker and Hartline 2005). In the study of

front-line boundary spanning service employees, the researchers' measure of internalization in part assessed employees' understanding of their firm's ethical codes. This suggests that one factor contributing to a firm's ethical climate, ethical codes, had some impact on one's understanding of codes. Certainly, one must first be aware of ethical codes and policies before they can be understood. Further, although there are likely moderating factors (e.g., probability of getting caught, severity of violations, risk/reward assessment), it is probable that individuals will take more effort to understand ethical violations if they will be punished for such violations. Therefore, we suggest that a more ethical climate should result in a greater understanding of what comprises an ethical violation. As such, we hypothesize that

- H1: *There is a positive relationship between perceptions of the firm's ethical climate and sales managers' understanding of what comprises an ethical violation in their firm.*

Ethical Understanding, Hiring, Training and Sales Management Behavior

Little attention has been given to the relationships between sales manager ethics and salesforce hiring and training practices. Some research shows sales managers' moral philosophy affects their moral judgment, which in turn affects their hiring decisions (Sivadas et al. 2002-03). More specifically, research finds a positive relationship between sales managers' attitudes about ethical standards in their company and profession and their use of ethical evaluation when hiring salespeople (Schwepker and Good 2004b; 2007a). Although ethical attitudes differ from ethical understanding, there is a relationship. As pointed out previously, attitude includes a cognitive component, which in part refers to a person's understanding (Bagozzi et al. 1979). Although this has yet to be empirically tested, sales managers' attitudes about ethical standards in their company and profession, therefore, are likely to be formed in part on the basis of some understanding of what comprises an ethical violation in their firm. Therefore, we propose that sales managers who

understand what comprises an ethical violation in their firm are likely to be in a better position and/or more interested in the ethics of the salespeople they hire. Consequently, these sales managers have a greater probability of considering salespeople's ethical behavior in the hiring evaluation process. Therefore, we suggest that

- H2: *There is a positive relationship between sales managers' understanding of what comprises an ethical violation in their firm and their use of ethical evaluation when hiring salespeople.*

Typically, the type of salesforce training conducted is driven by the training needs of the salesforce. However, sales managers may influence the emphasis given to ethics training. As companies face increasing product liability litigation, headlines about companies or salespeople involved in unethical behavior, and pressure to build long lasting relationships, the need for ethical training has intensified. Sales managers who do not understand what comprises an ethical violation in their firm are not in a good position to provide ethics training in the salesforce, either because they do not feel comfortable doing so, or more likely give little consideration to ethics in the first place. Conversely, sales managers who understand ethical violations are more likely to emphasize ethics training. Support for this comes from a study that found a positive relationship between sales managers' understanding of ethical violations and coaching for ethical situations (Schwepker and Good 2004b). Although sales coaching and training differ, they both attempt to provide guidance to salespeople. Thus, we hypothesize that

- H3: *There is a positive relationship between sales managers' understanding of what comprises an ethical violation in their firm and the extent of sales training devoted to ethics in the firm.*

Research indicates that ethical codes that are effectively communicated (Weeks and Nantel 1992) and enforced (Ferrell and Skinner 1988) result in higher ethical behavior. Effective communication requires understanding. Thus, we would expect those who understand the

ethical codes and policies of the organization to have a grasp of what is considered an ethical violation and in turn behave more ethically. We are concerned with sales managers' willingness to allow their salespeople to behave unethically. In essence, sales managers' willingness to allow unethical behavior reflects their ethical behavior and portrays, in part, their management of ethical behavior amongst the salesforce. Therefore we hypothesize that

- H4: *There is a negative relationship between sales managers' understanding of what comprises an ethical violation in their firm and their willingness to allow salespeople to behave unethically.*

Little is known about the interrelationships between ethical hiring, training and managing. Cognitive consistency theory suggests that people are motivated to be consistent in their thoughts and actions (Abelson et al. 1968). In this case, sales managers are expected to be consistent regarding their interest in ethics. Thus, there should be a positive association between hiring, training and managing ethical behavior in the salesforce.

A study examining the relationship between sales managers' moral philosophy and their hiring intentions found that sales managers' ideological relativism (favoring subjective or situational approaches to judgment over universal moral rules or absolutes) influenced their judgment of how hypothetical salespeople managed an ethical dilemma (Sivadas et al. 2002-03). This subsequently affected their judgments of moral rightness, justice, fairness and acceptability, which eventually affected their desire to hire the salesperson. Other research dealing with hiring practices has found a positive relationship between sales managers' ethical attitudes and their use of ethical evaluation when hiring salespeople (Schwepker and Good 2004b, 2007a). Similarly, Schwepker and Good (2007a) found sales managers' ethical attitudes positively related to the extent of sales training devoted to ethics in the firm. This limited research suggests a consistency exits between sales managers' morals and their managerial actions. Therefore, we believe that sales managers who assess ethics

in hiring are likely to devote more training to ethics and less likely to allow salespeople to behave unethically. Thus, we expect that

- H5: *There is a positive association between sales managers' use of ethical evaluation when hiring salespeople and the extent of sales training devoted to ethics in the firm.*

- H6: *There is a negative association between sales managers' use of ethical evaluation when hiring salespeople and their willingness to allow salespeople to behave unethically.*

- H7: *There is a negative association between the extent of sales training devoted to ethics in the firm and sales managers' willingness to allow salespeople to behave unethically.*

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

We collected data from a nationwide sample of nonretail sales managers from a variety of industries. We sent our survey (see Appendix for questionnaire scale items) to 2,085 sales managers from a list we purchased from a mailing list broker. From this mailing, we received 240 usable questionnaires for an 11.5 percent response rate. Although the response rate is similar to other studies examining ethical issues within the salesforce, (e.g., Valentine and Barnett 2003 at 12.7 percent utilizing multiple mailings), its size may have been limited for several reasons. For one, several of our study's characteristics (e.g., sample of sales professionals, no study sponsorship, lack of inducements) have been linked to reduced response rates (Swenson and Herche 1994). Secondly, we asked sensitive questions (i.e., about ethical behavior) which tend to lessen the response rate (Good and Stone 1995). Lastly, due to restrictions imposed upon the use of our mailing list, we were unable to make follow-up contact with respondents, reducing the probability for an improved response rate.

Married (87.5%) males (91.2%) dominate the sample. Nearly half of these sales managers

(47.7%) have an undergraduate degree, while 10.9% have obtained their graduate degree. Averaging 48 years old with 14.5 years of sales management experience, respondents earn on average $103,360 a year. Only 8.9% make less than $50,000 per year.   Nearly 60 percent (58.7%) of respondents' firms sell primarily physical goods, while 7.5% sell principally services and the rest (33.8%) work for firms selling both.

We used a time-trend extrapolation test (Armstrong and Overton 1977) utilizing study constructs, as well as demographic and classification variables, to estimate non-response bias.   Our results (F = 0.788, significance F = 0.694) suggest that non-response bias is not likely a problem.

Operationalization of Study Variables

To assess *ethical climate*, we used an ethical climate instrument that has frequently been used and validated (e.g., Mulki, Jaramillo and Locander 2006; Schwepker and Good 2004a, 2007a; Schwepker 2001; Weeks et al. 2004a). It consists of seven five-point Likert-type statements ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree" that assess perceptions of the presence and enforcement of codes of ethics, corporate policies on ethics, and top management actions related to ethics. Based on the definition of   climate (Schneider 1975; Schneider and Rentsch 1988), this measure taps shared policies and   reflects perceptions of behaviors that are   expected (i.e., ethical codes and policies) and supported (i.e., through enforcement and   punishment). After averaging responses, higher scores indicate a sales manager's perception of a more ethical climate.

Ethical hiring evaluation was assessed with two-item scale developed and validated by Schwepker and Good (2004b) and used by Schwepker and Good (2007a) to measure the extent to which ethics are considered when evaluating salespeople to hire. This measure assesses the degree to which sales managers   consider salespeople's ability to sell ethically along with their past ethical behavior, when evaluating salespeople during the hiring process. The scale

is comprised of   two five-point Likert-type statements ranging from (1) "never" to (5) "always". After averaging responses, the higher the score the greater the importance placed on evaluating salespeople's ethics when hiring.

To assess sales managers' *probability of allowing salespeople to act unethically (PROBACT)* we used a scale developed and validated by Schwepker and Good (2004a) and used by Schwepker and Good (2007b). Sales managers were asked to react to three different unethical sales scenarios concerning quota performance. In each scenario, sales managers were informed that it was the end of the fiscal year and that they were currently below acceptable quota performance. In each scenario, a salesperson is able to make a sale by committing an unethical act, thus allowing the sales manager to reach acceptable quota performance. Sales managers are then asked the probability of them allowing the action to occur on a scale of (1) "highly improbable" to (5) "highly probable." Scores are averaged across all three scenarios with higher scores indicating a greater probability of allowing the unethical act to occur. Scenarios are considered an acceptable means for conducting ethics research in marketing (Chonko, Tanner and Weeks 1996).

Finally, single item measures were used to assess understanding of ethical violations and the extent of sales training devoted to ethics. We used the same one item scale found in Schwepker and Good (2004b) to assess sales managers' *understanding of ethical violations*. Using a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree", we asked sales managers the following: "I am positive that I know what is an ethical violation in my firm." *Ethics training* was measured by a scale used by Schwepker and Good (2007b) that asks managers to indicate the percent of training time devoted to sales/business ethics. The use of a single item measure is justified if the construct being measured is sufficiently narrow or is unambiguous to the respondent (Sackett and Larson 1990) or is easily or uniformly imagined (Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007; Rossiter 2002). A meta-analysis on the use of single item measures shows that psychological constructs, such as job

satisfaction, can be effectively measured using a single item measure (Wanous, Reichers and Hudy 1997). Given previous use of these measures in the literature, coupled with their unambiguous nature, one-item measures were deemed acceptable for our purposes. Further, use of these measures in this study reduces the chances of common methods bias (Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007).

Measure Assessment

Given that the multi-item measures used in this study have been validated in previous studies, we assessed only the reliability of the measures. Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha was used to assess the reliability of each multi-item measure. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities (along the diagonal) and inter-correlations for the variables used in the study are provided in Table 1.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 2 reports the results of the hypotheses tests 1-4. We used multiple regression analysis using the "enter" procedure to test hypotheses 1-4, and correlation analysis to test hypotheses 5-7. Hypothesis one was tested by regressing ethical violation understanding on ethical climate. The regression equation is significant (F [1, 232] = 22.193, p < .001). The significant relationship

between ethical climate and ethical violation understanding (beta = 0.295, t = 4.711, p<.001) provides support for hypothesis one and suggests that ethical climate positively impacts sales managers' understanding of what is considered an ethical violation. To test hypotheses two, three and four, ethical evaluation, ethical training and probability of allowing salespeople to act unethically were each independently regressed on ethical violation understanding and a significant regression equation was found in each case. Support for hypotheses two (F [1, 232] = 11.076, p < .01; beta = 0.213, t = 3.328, p < .01), three (F [1, 227] = 4.04, p , .05; beta = 0.132, t = 2.010, p <.05) and four (F [1, 229] = 6.264, p < .05; beta = -0.163, t = -2.503, p <.05) suggests that sales managers who understand what is considered an ethical violation in their firm are more likely to consider ethics when evaluating salespeople to hire, devote more time to ethics in sales training, and are less likely to allow their salespeople to behave unethically than those who do not understand what is considered an ethical violation. Finally, significant correlations between ethical hiring and ethics training (0.189, p ≤ 0.01) and ethical hiring and PROBACT (-0.225, p ≤ 0.01) indicate support for hypotheses five and six. However, there is no support for hypothesis seven due to an

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities

	Ethical Climate	Understand Violation	Ethical Hiring	Ethical Training	PROBACT
Mean	3.99	4.48	4.18	20.26%	1.94
Standard Deviation	0.71	0.75	0.90	21.23%	0.81
Ethical Climate	(.86)				
Understand Violation	.296**	(na)			
Ethical Hiring	.164*	.214**	(.74)		
Ethical Training	.155*	.132*	.189**	(na)	
PROBACT	-.225**	-.163*	-.225**	-.108	(0.62)
*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 na = not applicable					

insignificant correlation between ethics training and PROBACT. Thus, sales managers who evaluate ethics when hiring also tend to give more attention to ethics training and managing ethics in the salesforce.

expect that integrating such behaviors requires a wide range of organizational connections that must be navigated. In such a setting, we will demonstrate later in this section that a foundation of ethical consistencies must be

Table 2
Regression Analysis Results

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient	Adjusted R^2	Hypothesis	
Understanding Ethical Violation	Ethical Climate	0.295**	0.083	H1	support
Ethical Hiring	Understanding Ethical Violation	0.213**	0.041	H2	support
Ethics Training	Understanding Ethical Violation	0.132*	0.013	H3	support
PROBACT	Understanding Ethical Violation	-0.163**	0.022	H4	support
*$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$					

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Overall, from a managerial perspective the strength of the model tested underscores the long-term commitments (and areas of focus) that working within an ethical framework requires from sales managers (e.g., training, hiring practices) and their selling organizations. Thus, from a practical view, creating an ethical environment (e.g., hiring employees with a higher level of moral judgment) has widespread impacts (e.g., creating different forms of sales performance) that are reflected in the results of this study and have an impact on field sales managers, and their organizations.

Managerially this study demonstrates that ethics represents a complex variable, and sales managers committed to operating ethically (and requiring the same from their subordinates) can

created and maintained by management to ensure the salesforce operates in the "fashion" desired. Thus, providing support for ethical decision making theory (i.e., Ferrell and Gresham 1985), these findings note the significant role of others in influencing ethical behavior. In such an environment, the sales manager alone cannot create and maintain an ethical climate within the selling unit. Instead, such an environment is cultivated by many organizational entities and participants, and from a practical perspective, sales managers must be willing to organizationally integrate with those who share this vision and are able to offer ethical positioning.

The implications for managers and practitioners of this study reveal some additional interesting operational implications to sellers. For instance, the strength of the relationship between ethical

climate and understanding ethical violations underscores the importance of managers precisely defining, and then communicating to interested parties the nature of acceptable/ unacceptable behaviors. In sales organizations that have clearly defined an environment that is acceptable/unacceptable (e.g., through actions such as having a code of ethics, and communicating to employees the firm enforces ethical policies), there is an organizational transparency in understanding what the firm considers an ethical violation. Such transparency provides the manager the substance and power to both enforce action against violators, while ensuring salespeople realize what and where the boundaries are of acceptable behavior (minimizing "ethical boundary spanning"). This results in less confusion, more accountability, and fewer obstructive behaviors by the salesforce. Actions taken to create a more ethical workplace can help firms avoid larger issues, such prosecution under the U.S. Sentencing Commission's guidelines (United States Sentencing Commission 2004).

The individual significance of H2, H3, and H4 reinforces (collectively) in a large sense the critical nature of ensuring that salespeople understand what defines an ethical violation. The importance of this finding was briefly alluded to previously, and it reflects a large responsibility on the part of the organization to clearly communicate expectations to employees. Specifically, understanding (or not) of what constitutes an ethical violation by sales professionals has a number of subsequent "chain reaction" implications to field managers. The impact that understanding unacceptable behaviors (ethical violations) has on influencing ethical evaluations when hiring, ethics training, and ethical managing all demonstrate the critical role that local and national managers have in ensuring that sales managers are provided an unambiguous vision of what is a violation of ethics. Equally, this finding underscores that if sales professionals do not comprehend what actions are acceptable/unacceptable, it has negative outcomes throughout the organization. As a result, we would recommend that sales

managers be provided documented information that identifies clearly these specific issues. This could include examples of common violations provided in writing contained within an ethics manual provided to salespeople. Hence, these results reflect the necessity of having a firm develop an "ethical roadmap" designed to devote significant attention to communicating exact managerial positions on what is acceptable (and unacceptable) in a highly competitive environment. This means that when firms define unethical (ethical) behaviors, such definitions need to be exact, precise, and reflective of actual sales positions (e.g., avoiding "theoretical" situations that appear unclear or are ambiguous). In this context, telling salespeople that "no one should ever act unethically" is an inadequate (and unclear) definition of what is acceptable. Instead, a document must create specific examples and related applications. For instance, organization documents could state something to the effect of "you must accompany all customers on company paid events. The cost of this event must not be more then 30 dollars per person and you must document in your sales report the sales objective of the excursion."

The significance of H5 suggests a positive framework for sales organizations that reflects the importance of embracing the actual "ethical preparation" of salespeople. Specifically, the discovered positive relationship between ethics training and ethics evaluation during the employment process reveals that sales managers are responsive to using their own firms' training practices, and implementing similar philosophies within the hiring process. This hypothesis suggests training and pre-employment practices both have long-term intertwined impacts on the sales manager's application of ethics. If an organization offers ethics training, it appears sales managers evaluate the applicant's ethics more closely, than if the hiring firm does not offer ethics training. Hence, firms offering ethics training can expect a positive outcome in sales managers, and they will begin to carry this expectation over to their own hiring process. By increasing (or implementing) ethics training within the sales organization, management can

expect a more through investigation into the (ethical) practices of applicants. Of course, this means that ethics training has significant impacts, in that long-term the hiring practices should in turn improve the ethical quality of new salespeople. Equally, when there is an evaluation of (to be hired) applicants in terms of their existing practices, this is a catalyst for more ethics training. If a firm screens individuals based on ethical behaviors, they can expect hired personnel will have higher expectations in terms of ethical behaviors, and this might include expectation of more ethics training.

The significant (negative) relationship between ethical evaluation when hiring and ethical managing (H6) demonstrates that a linkage exists at the managerial level between the decisions to employ individuals, and what actions a manager will permit from these same employees in terms of unethical behaviors. This finding suggests at a basic level that there is a critical relationship between pre-employment decisions (evaluating ethics) and post employment actions (allowing salespeople to act unethically). More exactly, sales managers who do not utilize a process of evaluating ethical behaviors as part of the employment process are more likely to allow unethical behaviors. So, it may be that while some managers may make a decision to not determine the possibility of poor (unethical) behaviors in advance of employment, this has an impact on the level of actions tolerated after employment. Obviously from an organizational view, this has the possibility of not being a healthy position, since the pre-determination of unethical behavior possibilities can be a great asset in evaluating potential employees, and failing to engage in such pre-employment assessment activities has potentially long term negative impacts.

The insignificance of Hypothesis 7 underscores the notion that training alone is not a solution in ensuring salespeople will not act in an unethical manner. In fact, this finding seems to emphasize and support to finding that the complexity in having ethical salespeople and sales training is but one piece of this puzzle to be solved (e.g., which could include employment practices,

mentoring processes, reward structures, etc.).

Finally, the findings also have theoretical implications. The results provide support for ethical decision making theory (Ferrell and Gresham 1985) and provide clarity to the means by which ethical climate can impact the decisions/behaviors of sales managers. Additionally, the results support the role of significant others, in this case sales managers, in influencing ethical behavior. Our findings also lend additional support for ethical control as an aspect of marketing control theory (Jaworski 1988). In this instance, formal control in the form of ethical climate indirectly influenced sales managers' behaviors.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As with many studies, ours has limitations. Because this research asks sensitive questions, its response rate may have been limited (Good and Stone 1995). Given that some questions dealt with ethics, we are limited by respondent's willingness to provide honest answers. Furthermore, although offering anonymity, as was done in this research, can help reduce the influence of socially desirable responses (Randall and Fernandes 1991), ethics research increases the probability of its occurrence. In addition, we reduced the possibility of bias by surveying the observers of behaviors (sales managers), and not the actual creators of the unethical behaviors (salespeople). Also, survey research provides an opportunity for bias due to common method variance. However, various aspects of our research design (physical separation of constructs on the questionnaire; anonymity; ensuring respondents that there are no right or wrong answers; not having respondents report retrospective accounts of their attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors; using different scale formats with unambiguous scale items; and not using bipolar numerical scale values) reduce its potential (Podsakoff et al. 2003). We might point out that other measures of ethical climate (e.g., Victor and Cullen 1988) exist and could alter the results. Thus, incorporating other measures of ethical climate into future studies

could prove useful. Finally, the characteristics (e.g., age and sex) of the respondents of the survey limit the study's analysis. Although these traits appear to be consistent with other sales research (e.g., Giacobbe et al. 2006; Silver, Dwyer, and Alford 2006; Weeks et al. 2004b), we need to recognize that discrepancies could exist among a differently distributed sample and/or population.

In terms of future research, the role of ethics still offers considerable interest and opportunities within the salesforce. For example, the overall framework of matching what is considered unethical, to what the salesperson's perception of what is unethical has not been fully explored in any depth. In this study, understanding of ethics by the salesforces is justifiably based on perceptions of the respondents. However, the authors believe that there is considerable room for expanding academic understanding of how and under what conditions ethics are "received" and "accepted" by the salesforce. In fact, while many studies in ethics are based on the perception of understanding right and wrong, we still understand little about the critical acceptance of organizational acceptance of ethics. In this regard, can ethics be changed, and if so, how?

Additionally, the role of ethics in hiring and other pre-employment activities needs to be broadened, to be more inclusive of mechanisms that offer better insight into the expected rationale and behaviors of sales professionals once they are employed. For example, this leads us to question what ethical measuring tools provide the "best" examination into the anticipated (future) behaviors of a salesperson. Work is needed in this area, and we are hopeful this observation will spur further research. In this context, additional research into the methods that enhance ethics training (the processes) would provide an important understanding and linkages between acceptable behaviors and managerial (training) actions. While we see academic research on sales training on a somewhat regular basis, we would contend that the details of understanding specific instruments that are more effective in terms of linking these tools and performance toward sales

quotas both represent worthy research agendas.

Finally, further research focusing on linking ethical performance to sales performance remains a critically missed link in most sales research. With little question, sales performance remains a critical issue in most sales organizations and academic research. We would like to call for additional research linking the areas we have examined (e.g., hiring, training, managing, and understanding ethics and ethical climate) and their need to be explored more closely in the context of actual sales performance. Failing to do so leaves a large gap in the organizational purpose of the sales unit.

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Appendix – Scale Items

Ethical Climate

EC1 My company has a formal, written code of ethics

EC2 My company strictly enforces a code of ethics

EC3 My company has policies with regards to ethical behavior

EC4 My company strictly enforces policies regarding ethical behavior

EC5 Top management in my company has let it be known in no uncertain terms that ethical behaviors will not be tolerated

EC6 If a sales executive in my company is discovered to have engaged in unethical behavior that results primarily in *personal gain* (rather than corporate gain), she or he will be promptly reprimanded

EC7 If a sales executive in my company is discovered to have engaged in unethical behavior that

results in primarily *corporate gain* (rather than personal gain), she or he will be promptly

reprimanded

Ethical Hiring Evaluation

EH1 When evaluating salespeople to hire, how often is their ability to sell ethically considered?

EH2 When evaluating salespeople to hire, how often is their past ethical behavior considered?

Probability of Allowing Salespeople to Act Unethically (PROBACT)

SITUATION: It is the end of the fiscal year and you are currently **below acceptable quota performance**.

ACTION 1: To make quota, one of your salespeople makes statements to an existing customer that exaggerate the seriousness of the problem. As a result, he or she is able to get the order and you achieve acceptable quota performance.

What is the probability of you allowing this action to occur?

ACTION 2: To make quota, one of your salespeople promises the customer that he or she will receive the order one week from today, a date at which the customer must have the merchandise. Your salesperson knows that the chances of meeting this deadline are nearly impossible, yet he or she would never mention this fact. As a result, he or she gets the order and you achieve acceptable quota performance.

What is the probability of you allowing this action to occur?

ACTION 3: To make quota, one of your salespeople exploits a weakness in a customer=s personality in order to pressure him/her into buying something that does not satisfy his/her needs. As a result, he or she is able to get the order and you achieve acceptable quota performance.

What is the probability of you allowing this action to occur?

Ethics Training

ETRAIN Approximately what percent of a salesperson's training is devoted to sales/business

ethics (0-100%)?

Understanding of Ethical Violations

I am positive that I know what is an ethical violation in my firm.

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