PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT OF SALESPEOPLE: ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

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In this era of customer relationship management (CRM), companies that successfully empower their salespeople may obtain substantial advantages over competitors. Guided by social cognitive theory, we analyze the extant empowerment literature to develop an integrative conceptual framework to help sales managers understand how psychological empowerment of their salespeople may increase customer-oriented selling, salesperson job satisfaction, and customer satisfaction. A conceptual model and several research propositions are presented to advance our understanding of psychological empowerment for salespeople, followed by a discussion of the implications for academic research and sales management practice. Finally, guidelines are offered to sales managers for psychologically empowering their salespeople.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, employee empowerment has been garnering heightened attention among organizational researchers and business practitioners (Birdi et al. 2008). Growing interest in the empowerment concept is attributable, at least in part, to intensifying domestic and global competition that demands seller initiative and innovation in satisfying customers (Hair et al. 2009), the empirically validated relationship between empowerment and job performance (Liden, Wayne, and Sparrowe 2000), and the manifest move toward customer oriented selling and customer relationship management (CRM) in the twenty-first century (Kotler and Keller 2009, p. 133). Empowerment is a process whereby an organization, through its management, provides power to employees (Sagie and Koslowsky 2000, p. 81). Notwithstanding its widespread advocacy (Menon 2001), however, there is scant agreement on the definition and dimensions of the concept of empowerment (Melhem 2004, p. 73. According to Menon (2001), there are three conceptualizations of empowerment. First,

empowerment can be considered an act: the act of granting power to subordinates. Second, it can be conceived as a process that involves both the release of power by managers and the experiencing of power by subordinates. Third, it can be considered a *psychological state* that manifests itself as cognitions in those being empowered. In support of the latter two conceptualizations, Robbins, Crino, and Fredendall (2002) aver that empowerment is a cognition-shaping rather than action-changing process that must occur within the mind-sets of both managers and salespeople.

Despite the lack of agreement on its precise definition, empowerment is crucial for salespeople, given the necessity for them to provide tailored responses to changing customer expectations, the urgency to successfully handle complaints so as to turn initially dissatisfied customers into satisfied ones, and to help alleviate the role stress incurred in their boundary spanning jobs between seller and buyer organizations (Anderson and Huang 2006). Moreover, with salespeople increasingly perceived as the ultimate customer relationship

managers (Palmatier et al. 2008), empowerment can be a valuable tool for sales managers in motivating salespeople to build and nurture lasting customer relationships (Yim, Anderson, and Swaminathan 2004).

To date, the empowerment construct remains under-researched despite its relevance and importance to service employees, especially for major account business-to-business salespeople (Anderson and Huang 2006). Its understanding in the sales literature is severely deficient as scant efforts have been made to rigorously link sales force empowerment to customer outcomes such as service quality perception and satisfaction (Sparks, Bradley, and Callan 1997). Only limited attempts have been made to look into the mechanism of how customer satisfaction or salesperson job satisfaction can be enhanced via salesperson empowerment, and a comprehensive conceptual framework incorporating the antecedents and consequences of empowerment in a sales setting has yet to be developed (Menon 2001, p. 154).

In response to the call for a unifying model capable of integrating the diverse concepts and relationships that characterize the empowerment process (Robbins, Crino, and Fredendall 2002), the present investigation is designed to provide an integrative conceptual framework to more thoroughly understand how empowerment can impact both major account salesperson and customer outcomes in a sales setting. In particular, we focus on the construct "psychological empowerment" for two reasons. First, the benefits of empowerment will be actualized only if the salespeople actually perceive empowerment, i.e., they feel a psychological state of empowerment (Menon 2001, p. 158). Second, compared with the traditional managerial understanding and

practices of empowerment, it has received comparatively little attention as a psychological construct from the subordinate perspective (Dee, Henkin, and Duemer 2003, p. 258), particularly in a sales milieu. Therefore, we attempt to identify the critical antecedents and consequences of psychological empowerment of salespeople. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to comprehensively address the psychological aspects of empowerment in a sales environment.

Drawing upon literature spanning across the disciplines of management, marketing, psychology, and sociology, we propose an integrated conceptual model depicting the psychological empowerment of salespeople. In accordance with the model, a number of research propositions are offered, followed by a discussion of their implications for academic research and improved sales management practice, including specific recommendations.

EXTANT RESEARCH ON EMPOWERMENT

The concept of sales force empowerment seems particularly relevant to sales force management in this early twenty-first century where customer relationship selling is of ever-increasing importance (Kotler and Keller 2009). Salespeople need greater latitude over their selling and service activities to innovatively create superior added value for customers and thereby build profitable, long-term relationships with them. Given the extent of salesperson-customer interaction and negotiation, an appropriate degree of responsiveness and flexibility for salespeople is needed to satisfy the ever changing needs of customers. Today, salespeople have instant access to information (e.g., price changes, inventory levels, new product introductions, promotional campaigns,

or delivery dates) that used to be provided only through sales managers. Yet, most contemporary salespeople are still dependent on their sales managers for approval on anything exceptional that a customer requests in negotiations, such as special price discounts, credit for unsatisfactory products, accelerated delivery or installation dates, or unique service arrangements. And, most salespeople remain in the dark as to the profitability of different prospects or customers because that information is restricted to sales managers (Anderson and Huang 2006). Empowerment is aimed at "turning the front line loose" to use their knowledge, initiative, and creativity to promptly and fully satisfy customers in face-to-face interactions (Bowen and Lawler 1992, p. 32). Sales force empowerment can provide major benefits to both the selling firm and its salespeople by enabling timely "on-the-spot" responses to customer requests, faster resolution of customer complaints, and more trusting interactions with customers (Bowen and Lawler 1992). Overall, salesperson empowerment seems highly conducive to not only meeting but exceeding customer expectations (Martin and Bush 2003) and bringing about long-term customer satisfaction and loyalty (Chow, Sha, and Hong 2006).

To date, organizational policies and practices have largely characterized empowerment from a macro perspective (Seibert et al. 2004) at the managerial level. From a managerial perspective, empowerment has been viewed variously as participative management (Block 1987), job involvement (Rafiq and Ahmed 1998), and a managerial control mechanism (Chebat and Kollias 2000).

However, when viewed from a micro (Seibert et al. 2004) or psychological perspective at the

employee level, empowerment has been conceptualized as a motivational construct (e.g., Conger and Kanungo 1988; Spreitzer 1995). In the present study, we focus on the construct "*psychological empowerment*" for two major reasons. First and foremost, we argue that sales force empowerment will be effective and beneficial *only if* salespeople actually perceive or experience empowerment, i.e., they sense the psychological state of empowerment (Menon 2001, p. 158). Individual salespeople may respond differently to the same managerial efforts toward empowerment, and such initiatives will be efficacious only if salespeople feel personally empowered and experience an altered emotional state (Lashley 1998, p. 142). "Creating an empowered state of mind" (Bowen and Lawler 1995, p. 73) is paramount, thus the importance of fully understanding the construct "psychological empowerment" merits incisive inquiry (Spreitzer 1995).

Second, the majority of research conducted to date has focused on the managerial perceptions and practices of empowerment, so relatively few research efforts have been devoted to understanding empowerment as a psychological construct from the perspective of subordinates (Dee, Henkin, and Duemer 2003, p. 258). This deficiency in understanding the construct of "psychological empowerment," especially in a sales context, calls for more investigation and understanding because the potential benefits for managers, salespeople, and customers may be substantial.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

Building upon seminal work by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990), empowerment is operationally defined as a psychological or motivational construct

manifested by a set of four cognitions (task assessments) reflecting the individual's orientation toward his or her job role: meaningfulness, impact, competence, and choice. As defined by Thomas and Velthouse (1990, p. 672), meaningfulness is the individual's intrinsic caring about a given task and is concerned with the value of the task goal judged in relation to the individual's own value system. Impact is understood by the degree to which the individual perceives that his or her behavior makes a difference in terms of accomplishing the task purpose. Competence is the degree to which a person can perform task activities skillfully when he or she tries. Choice involves causal responsibility for a person's actions. These four dimensions are considered "the essential prerequisites for the motivated individuals to engage in empowered behaviors in the work environment" (Robbins, Crino, and Fredendall 2002, p. 422). As a whole, this approach is predicated on the "perception aspect" where empowerment is the "psychological state of a subordinate" resulting from efforts by his or her supervisor (Lee and Koh 2001, p. 686) and/or the organizational empowering structures, policies, and practices (Seibert, Siler, and Randolph 2004, p. 332). Let's now turn to the antecedents and consequences of psychological empowerment of salespeople, and formulate a series of testable propositions.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT OF SALESPEOPLE

Figure 1 depicts the antecedents and consequences of psychological empowerment of salespeople. Focusing on psychological empowerment from the subordinate perspective

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of Psychological Empowerment of Salespeople
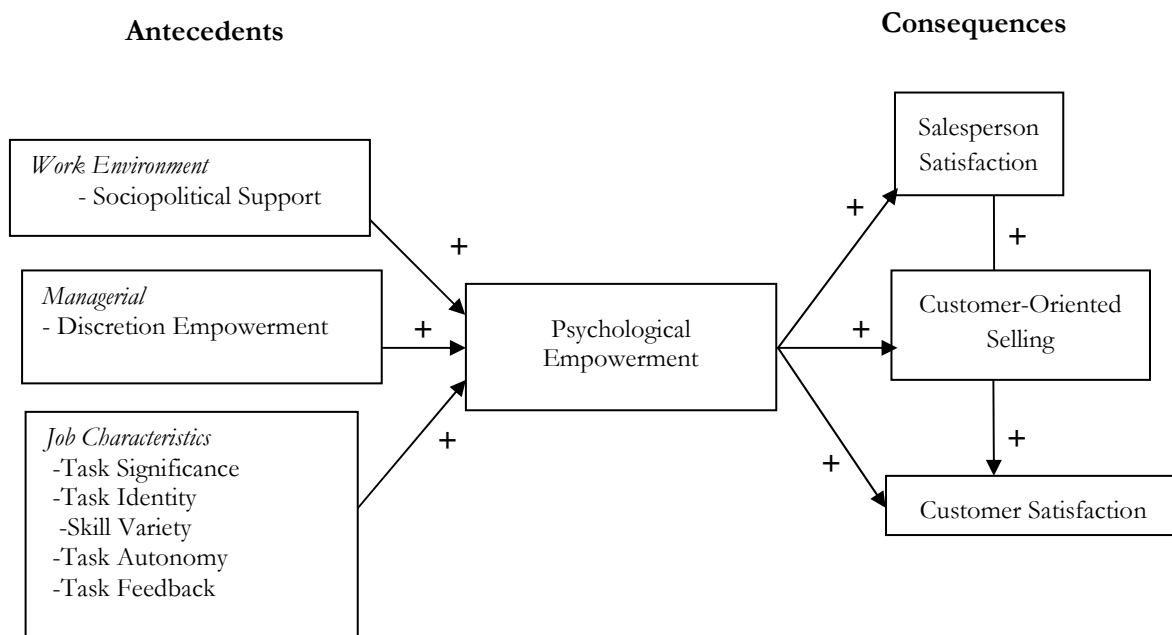
instead of the widely researched managerial perspective of empowerment emphasizes the mediating link between empowering acts and outcomes such as satisfaction for salespeople and customers (Menon 2001, p. 158).

Underlying this model are individual (cognitive and affective), behavioral (outcomes and consequences), and environmental (work setting characteristics) factors, which in accord with social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986) emphasize individual perceptions and interpretations of behavior and attitudes within a work environment. To better understand and analyze the salesperson's feelings of empowerment, let's examine the antecedents to psychological empowerment in more detail.

ANTECEDENTS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

Drawing upon organizational behavior research, we explore three sets of factors as important antecedents to psychological empowerment: sociopolitical support, discretion empowerment, and job characteristics (e.g., Kraimer, Seibert, and Liden 1999; Spreitzer 1996).

Sociopolitical Support Within the Work Environment

Sociopolitical support is defined as "endorsement or approval from or legitimacy granted by organizational constituencies and is typically gained from membership in organizational networks" (Spreitzer 1996, p. 488). This support commonly involves an individual's boss, subordinates, peers, and members in his or her work group. Membership in such support networks facilitates and enhances social exchange with key organizational constituencies and thus engenders a sense of personal acceptance and power, which may be manifested in augmented

feelings of both self-determination and impact (Spreitzer 1996). Conversely, Gist and Mitchell (1992) argue that a lack of support from key constituencies may thwart feelings of competence, underscoring the importance of sociopolitical support in enhancing feelings of empowerment.

Behaviors are affected by social relations and embedded in a social structure (Granovetter 1985). Participants in the social structure such as salespeople spanning the boundary between the seller and buyer organizations share tacit information, jointly solve problems (Uzzi 1997), and acquire knowledge from repeated and enduring exchange relationships (Inkpen and Tsang 2005). A supportive social network leads to increased feelings of competence (Spreitzer 1995) and thus enhanced empowerment. With sociopolitical support within the work environment, salespeople are likely to be more energized and to experience greater empowerment (Corsun and Enz 1999). Therefore:

P1. Sociopolitical support enhances psychological empowerment of the salesperson.

Managerial Discretion Empowerment.

Conceptualized as the management practice of giving subordinates "the discretion to make day-to-day decisions about job-related activities" (Bowen and Lawler 1992; Hartline and Ferrell 1996), managerial discretion empowerment provides salespeople greater latitude in negotiating with prospects and customers. Kelly (1993, p. 104) stresses that when employees are truly empowered they experience greater freedom to exercise their own discretion during service provision. Allowing salespeople more discretion in their sales

negotiations and other interactions with customers would seem to be an essential prerequisite for boosting feelings of empowerment for salespeople. Furthermore, when prospects and customers see that the salesperson has the power and flexibility to resolve issues and make concessions without a time-out to obtain the approval of a manager, they feel more respect for the salesperson and more empowered themselves because they are dealing with someone with decision making authority. Therefore:

P2. Discretion empowerment enhances psychological empowerment of the salesperson.

Job (Task) Characteristics

According to Hackman and Oldman (1976), there are five core job dimensions germane to motivation in the realm of job or task characteristics: skill variety, task identity, significance, autonomy, and feedback. As perceptions of empowerment arise from task assessments involving meaning, impact, competence, and self-determination (Thomas and Velthouse 1990), job characteristics are considered proximal predictors of psychological empowerment. While job characteristics are designed to measure the *objective* aspects of tasks, psychological empowerment is reflective of employees' *emotional* responses to their work (Kraimer, Seibert, and Liden 1999).

If the job task is *significant* and has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people (Hackman and Oldman 1976), the salesperson's perception of *meaning* is likely to be heightened and thus his or her feelings of empowerment are augmented. An *autonomous* task provides freedom to the salesperson in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be

undertaken (Hackman and Oldman 1976) which are conducive to the feelings of *self-determination* and therefore psychological empowerment. Furthermore, positive direct and immediate task *feedback* from customers and superiors gives the salesperson clear information concerning his or her performance effectiveness (Hackman and Oldman 1976), thereby fostering feelings of *competence* (Kraimer, Seibert, and Liden 1999). In addition, prompt feedback allows cognitive assessments of *impact* (Liden, Wayne, and Sparrowe 2000) because "an individual is unlikely to be able to exert influence without knowledge of results" (Kraimer, Seibert, and Liden 1999, p. 130). The knowledge of results or feedback is therefore considered an important precursor to exerting influence or impact in a sales environment and generating feelings of empowerment. Prior research supports the contention that job characteristics are positively related to psychological empowerment (e.g., Kraimer, Seibert, and Liden 1999; Liden, Wayne, and Sparrowe 2000). Thus, we formulate the following proposition:

P3. Job characteristics affect psychological empowerment of the salesperson.

CONSEQUENCES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

Specifically, we investigate salesperson job satisfaction, customer-oriented selling, and customer satisfaction as important consequences of psychological empowerment as suggested in the extant literature (Peccei and Rosenthal 2001).

Salesperson outcomes—Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction can be defined as "an attitude stemming from an evaluative process in which the employee's perceived actual work

environment is compared to a perceived standard" (Homburg and Stock 2005, p. 397). Thus, if salespeople can find meaning in their jobs (Spreitzer 1995) congruent with and fulfilling their desired work values, they are more apt to be satisfied. What's more, if salespeople feel competent, they are more likely to be confident and satisfied with their jobs. Furthermore, salespeople exhibiting higher self-determination can more readily attribute success to themselves, likely leading to greater job satisfaction. Consequently, we formulate the following proposition:

P4. Psychological empowerment of a
     salesperson enhances his or her job
     satisfaction.

Salesperson outcomes—Customer-oriented selling

Customer-oriented selling has been described as "the practice of the marketing concept at the individual salesperson and customer levels" (Saxe and Weitz 1982, pp. 343-344). In their seminal work, Saxe and Weitz elaborate on the characteristics of customer-oriented selling as exemplified by the desire to help customers make satisfying purchase decisions by assisting them in assessing their needs, then accurately describing offerings that will satisfy those needs while avoiding manipulative influence tactics and the use of high pressure.

Customer-oriented selling has been widely advocated by sales organizations in an effort to improve customer service and therefore achieve performance goals (Flaherty, Dahlstrom, and Skinner 1999). Achieving customer service excellence and implementing a CRM strategy are both predicated on salespeople exhibiting a strong customer-orientation to attain customer satisfaction (Saxe and Weitz 1982). The

favorable results of enacting customer-oriented selling include greater sales force effectiveness (Baldauf and Cravens 1999) and improved customer-salesperson relationships (Williams and Attaway 1996).

By virtue of the favorable outcomes brought about by selling in a customer-oriented manner, it is important to identify the critical antecedents to customer-oriented selling. One of these antecedents is the salesperson's psychological empowerment (Peccei and Rosenthal 2001). Specifically, psychological empowerment is associated with flexibility (Thomas and Velthouse 1990) and the initiation of innovative actions when problems and opportunities are encountered (Spreitzer 1995) which constitute the essence of customer-oriented selling. Salespeople need the authority to make independent on-the-spot decisions to flexibly address dynamic customers' needs (Knouse and Strutton 1996), and they also need the power to initiate creative solutions to proactively satisfy customers. In essence, a psychologically empowered salesperson is a *procreator* (Williams and Attaway 1996) who feels competent and free to design a market offering tailor-made to the idiosyncratic needs of the customer.

Psychologically empowered salespeople who perceive that they are able to make significant *impact* on their jobs are more confident, and such perceptions can drive them to expend more customer-oriented efforts to better satisfy customers (Thomas and Velthouse 1990). Feeling *competent* at work means that salespeople can mobilize their skills and resources effectively to achieve task goals (Gist and Mitchell 1992) which translates into offering innovative solutions that more fully satisfy customer needs (Saxe and Weitz 1982). Additionally, perceiving *choice* or self-determination (Spreitzer 1995) when

interacting with customers is a prerequisite for responding flexibly to dynamic customer needs and underlies the practice of customer-oriented selling. Therefore, we posit:

P5. Psychological empowerment of the salesperson promotes customer-oriented selling.

According to social exchange theory (Blau 1964), salespeople who derive satisfaction from their jobs will reciprocate with behaviors supporting those they serve and from whom they benefit (i.e., customers). In other words, highly satisfied salespeople are likely to engage in more customer-oriented selling behaviors in a bid to further maintain and enhance these mutually beneficial relationships. Thus, consistent with the literature, we hypothesize:

P6. Job satisfaction experienced by the salesperson enhances customer-oriented selling.

Customer outcome—Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is defined as the degree of fulfillment of some need, desire, goal, or other plausible end state in a given exchange encounter between the customer and the salesperson (Oliver 1999). A psychologically empowered salesperson, who is energized, competent, and exhibits self-determination (Spreitzer 1995), is more likely to deliver product and service fulfillment from which customer satisfaction can be derived. Additionally, customers are likely to be more satisfied when they perceive that salespeople are empowered and willing to take responsive and competent action to promptly address their needs and handle their problems (Spinelli and Canavos 2000). When salespeople and customers are "physically, organizationally, and psychologically close" (Schneider and Bowen

1985, p. 431), psychological empowerment of the salesperson should augment customer satisfaction by contributing to customer perceptions of their own control, self-worth, and competence (Sparks et al. 1997). As such:

P7. Psychological empowerment of the salesperson enhances customer satisfaction.

In line with our foregoing discussion, a logical assumption is that customer-oriented selling behaviors will enhance the customer's satisfaction level in the sales encounter. It follows that customers will be more satisfied by customer-oriented salespeople who exhibit genuine caring for their needs and who will take the initiatives to fully meet those needs in timely fashion. Therefore, we presume:

P8. The salesperson's customer-oriented selling behaviors enhance customer satisfaction.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Marketing scholars commonly embrace empowerment as giving more discretion to subordinates to make day-to-day decisions in their jobs (Hartline and Ferrell 1996). No known research, however, has been undertaken heretofore to shed light on the specific dimensions for psychological empowerment of salespeople. In light of the dearth of research on psychological empowerment in a sales setting, the present study offers an integrative model to better understand the perceptions of empowerment by salespeople, and indicates how psychological empowerment may benefit selling firms in promoting customer-oriented selling behaviors, as well as in developing both salesperson and customer satisfaction. By focusing on the perceptual aspect of empowerment and looking into the concept of

psychological empowerment within a sales setting, we also respond to the call from Williams and Plouffe (2007) who point out that sales research in the area of motivation has grown very incrementally due to a lack of new applied constructs. In this investigation, we draw from research across several social sciences to apply the concepts of psychological empowerment to the sales domain. Our findings and propositions offer significant implications for both academic research and sales management practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

First and foremost, we recommend research be conducted to empirically test and validate the theoretical framework provided herein. We conceptualize empowerment as a *process*, in accord with Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Robbins, Crino, and Fredendall 2002), and this calls for a *longitudinal* research design to test the tenability of our proposed model.

Though we have identified what we believe are the most crucial links in the empowerment process as portrayed in our model, we realize that there may be other constructs and/or relationships that call for further research endeavors. For instance, *leadership styles* may possibly influence the perceptions of empowerment (Avolio et al. 2004). Furthermore, as psychologically empowered salespeople are more motivated to nurture customer loyalty, customer retention might also be an outcome variable in the model. Given the foregoing conjectures, we believe our inquiry significantly enhances knowledge on the nomological network of psychological empowerment in a sales setting, and sets forth appropriate testable hypotheses.

Implication for Sales Management Practice

Based on our analysis of the empowerment

literature, development of an integrated conceptual framework, and setting forth eight research propositions for the psychological empowerment of salespeople, we feel confident that sales managers who *psychologically empower* their sales force are likely to see substantial benefits in terms of customer-oriented selling, and increased satisfaction for both their salespeople and customers. As set forth in our conceptual framework, there are three antecedents to successful salesperson empowerment: (1) sociopolitical support in the sales work environment, (2) discretionary empowerment from sales management, and (3) provision of essential job task characteristics. In carrying out the psychological empowerment of their salespeople, sales managers need to understand and follow several guidelines which may require a dramatic change of attitude.

Sales Management Guidelines

Giving salespeople the flexibility to make decisions about job-related activities or *discretion empowerment* (Bowen and Lawler 1992) is a necessary but not sufficient condition for salespeople to fully engage in empowered behaviors in the sales environment (Robbins, Crino, and Fredendall 2002). Sales managers, need to understand that empowerment is *not* simply granting salespeople increased leeway to make more day-to-day decisions. Empowerment means going beyond mere *delegation* to *enabling* salespeople by conveying trust and confidence in their ability and willingness to do a first-rate job for customers and the company. Understandably, empowerment may pose risks for sales managers and their salespeople. Some sales managers may be reluctant to give up control over results for which they are likely to be held accountable, thus they convey their lack of trust in subordinates. From the perspective

of salespeople, some may be fearful of making decision mistakes for which they will be reprimanded, so they hide behind bureaucratic procedures and develop decision paralysis when facing unanticipated customer requests. To overcome these fears, a bond of trust must be established between sales managers and their salespeople. Mutual trust is a shared belief that you can rely on each other in working toward organizational goals. Sales manager must be willing to become vulnerable to the decisions and actions of their salespeople and manifest confidence that they will perform as expected without being monitored or controlled. Unless sales managers can let go and trust their salespeople, they will not be able to fully empower them and optimize the achievement of desirable outcomes.

Because empowerment will be fruitful *only if* the salespeople actually perceive or psychologically experience empowerment (Menon 2001), sales managers need to provide and champion sociopolitical support networks (Spreitzer 1996) conducive to providing salespeople with feelings of confidence and support from the entire organization: superiors, peers, and subordinates in serving customers. Sales managers should proactively identify and remove conditions in the organizational structure, policies, and procedures that foster feelings of frustration or powerlessness among salespeople. In addition, salespeople need to be encouraged and rewarded for exercising initiative and creativity in satisfying customers. Sales managers can further empower salespeople by confidently sharing information, such as profitability by market segments (products, customers, territories), to help them understand and contribute to organizational goals. Regardless of leadership style, every sales manager needs to show concern for the emotional needs and feelings of salespeople by

striving to enhance their sense of personal worth and thus feelings of independence in making decisions on behalf of the organization and its customers (Spreitzer 1996). This requires sales managers to release their authority sufficiently to allow salespeople to make occasional mistakes without fear of reprimand. In addition, sales managers should try to *enrich* the sales tasks (Hackman and Oldman 1976) of their salespeople so that they will enjoy positive feelings about the importance of their jobs to the organization and to customers, that they experience the freedom and autonomy to creatively handle special customer requests, and that they anticipate praise or rewards for exercising initiative and creativity in striving to satisfy customers. Sales jobs designed to be significant and meaningful to the salespeople, along with consistent constructive performance feedback from sales managers, can provide salespeople with enhanced feelings of empowerment. Moreover, salespeople who experience creative flexibility and personal control over decision-making in negotiating with customers are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward satisfying customers and greater commitment to organizational values (Schneider, White, and Paul 1998). Whereas, salespeople who feel relatively powerless may compensate for such negative feelings by attempting to dominate relationships with customers by behaving more bureaucratically and less responsively to customer requests, thereby resulting in lower customer satisfaction (Yagil 2001). In order for salespeople to feel empowered, sales managers need to release traditional power and prerogatives and manifest trust in their salespeople, demonstrate their commitment to CRM, eliminate organizational barriers to empowering salespeople and customers, nurture a customer-oriented culture

and supportive working environment for salespeople, and provide frequent empowerment training along with suitable reward systems to promote desirable CRM behaviors.

CONCLUSION

In the intensely competitive markets of the twenty-first century, sales force empowerment will become increasingly important in academic research and business practice (Seibert et al. 2004). As a managerial tool (Chebat and Kollias 2000) aimed at "turning the front line loose" (Bowen and Lawler 1992, p. 32), empowerment has profound application to the sales domain (Martin and Bush 2003) where boundary-spanning salespeople need flexibility and discretionary freedom to properly and promptly address the changing needs of customers (Hair et al. 2009). Psychological empowerment can be an effective motivating force for salespeople with substantial favorable outcomes such as increased customer-oriented selling behaviors, enhanced salesperson job satisfaction, and improved customer satisfaction.

Sales managers are strongly urged to recognize and focus on the crucial role of psychological empowerment in order to more effectively motivate their salespeople to better serve customers in the increasingly competitive and global environment of the twenty-first century. Salespeople, as the ultimate "relationship managers," must continuously learn about their customers and adapt to their changing needs and wants in order to nurture long-term, mutually beneficially customer relationships (Turley and Geiger 2006). Aided by inexorable advances in telecommunication technologies, salespeople are becoming increasingly independent of their sales managers and better equipped to carry out their duties of forging long-term customer relationships while becoming more self-

managed, self-directed, and self-motivated (Kotler and Keller, 2009; Jones et al. 2005; Anderson 1996). Driven by the forces of technology to become more self-managed, salespeople also need to be psychologically empowered to fulfill their expanding CRM roles in front-line interactions with customers. Psychological empowerment for salespeople, therefore, is not only recommended but virtually essential in this era of relationship selling. *Psychologically empowering* salespeople also provides the added benefits of increasing their job satisfaction as they become more confident, able, and willing to fully satisfy customers and develop long-run relationships. Overall, psychological empowerment of salespeople can be an impressive win-win for all: sales managers, salespeople, and customers.

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