Support and Participation in Sales Manager-Salesperson Interactions

By David A. Gilliam and Steven W. Rayburn

This study examines how salespeople view sales manager support and participation. Prior research is limited and rather piecemeal on the right use and balance of support and participation in sales manager-salesperson interactions. Qualitative interviews of salespeople form the basis of the inquiry. The results are juxtaposed with existing literature to create a framework and set of propositions based on the salesperson's desires for support and participation. Researchers will benefit from this more complete network of effects. Sales managers will benefit from better understanding salespeople's perspectives of beneficial types and levels of support and participation in the field.

INTRODUCTION

The sales manager and salesperson must co-create value, yet researchers have long known that their perspectives can sometimes be incongruent (Bauman and LeMeunier-Fitzhugh 2015; Piercy and Lane 2003). Senior executives expect sales managers to both support their salespeople and to participate in the selling process to create value (Mallin 2018). However, Deeter-Schmelz and colleagues (2008) found an important dichotomy between the views of sales managers and salespeople. While sales managers often viewed their role as that of participant, salespeople tended to view the sales manager's role as providing support. This divergence of opinions may thwart effective sales manager-salesperson interactions during the sales process. A deeper understanding of salespeople's perspective of effective support and participation will allow sales managers to find the right balance.

Researchers have examined various aspects of the sales manager-salesperson interaction. The sales manager as teacher and coach (Deeter-Schmelz and Sutton 2015), role model (Rich 1997), transformational leader (Shannahan, Bush and Shannahan 2013), emotional supporter (Kemp, Borders, and Rick 2013), deliverer of bad news (Dubinsky, Kim, and Lee 2011), provider of feedback (Jaworski and Kohli 1991), provider of empowerment (Martin and Bush 2006) and problem solver (Lee and Cadogan 2009) have all garnered attention.

Researchers have also attributed many key outcomes to effective sales manager-salesperson interactions. Some examples are trust, job satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, burnout and turnover prevention, organizational commitment, and sales performance (Brashear et al. 2003; Kemp et al. 2013; Lewin and Sager 2008). However, research has largely explored individual aspects of support or participation rather than either holistically. Concurrent exploration of support and participation is also missing from the literature. Further, we know of no existing framework that explains the network of effects surrounding both support and participation simultaneously.

We contribute to extant literature with an exploration of salespeople's perceptions of the dual roles of sales manager support and participation. The inquiry fostered a holistic framework and set of propositions by exploring the following research questions: 1) how do salespeople perceive and experience sales manager support and participation; 2) what influences sales manager support and participation; and, 3) how does sales manager support and participation affect key salesperson outcomes? The goal is a framework of sales manager support and participation as co-paths to sales manager-salesperson interactions that foster value co-creation across sales contexts. The framework proposes a network of effects for support and participation that has important implications for research and practice within sales manager-salesperson interactions in business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) sales organizations.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussing sales managers and salespeople, Bauman and LeMeunier-Fitzhugh (2015, p. 23) stated, "to achieve truly mutual value cocreation, it is not just the salesperson that should act as a partner to the customer, but both actors should be partners to each other." Yet achieving this is difficult. The literature contains various conceptions of managerial support along with similar activities. Some are quite narrow defining support as sales managers being "encouraging and tolerant" (Martin and Bush 2006, p. 420). Likewise, Arnold and colleagues (2009) split sales manager activities into support and monitoring but their measures actually limit support to the use of power to help salespeople and monitoring to keeping track of salesperson progress toward goals. Others are quite broad and include multiple aspects like teaching, role modelling, empowerment and climate-creation (e.g., Badrinarayanan et al. 2015).

Researchers have also mixed support with other variables as in the case of supportive leadership and social support. Disagreement about the true nature of supportive leadership and its many overlapping and contradictory definitions causes problems for those using this construct (Jaramillo and Mulki 2008). In discussing social support, some have said that it is a key form of support from the sales manager, especially for handling stress (Deeter-Schmelz and Ramsey 1997).

Coaching is a similar construct to support that is often associated with supervisory feedback and role modelling (Rich 1998). For instance, Badrinarayanan et al. (2015) state that coaches tell salespeople how to improve their behavior, role model for them, and create an atmosphere of respect and trust. Coaching is more than simply communicating performance statistics and used effectively is particularly effective when strategically directed at salespeople with attributes like youthfulness, lack of formal education, and/or low belief in the product or company (Onyemah 2009).

Some researchers have extended the concept of sales manager support to include mentorship (Yu, Patterson, and de Ruyter 2015). In reality, mentorship can come from anywhere inside or outside the mentee's organization; this is not a role just for the sales manager. Other researchers suggest that a supportive psychological climate within the organization reflects sales manager support (Chen, Peng and Hung 2015). This is problematical since managers are only one aspect of the organizational climate and climate dynamics extend well beyond the sales manager-salesperson interaction.

Perhaps the most succinct, yet complete, conceptualization of sales manager support is offered by House (1981) which includes informational, instrumental and emotional aid to salespeople. Research draws on this conceptualization but has not explicitly examined its veracity empirically (e.g., Lewin and Seger 2008). Boundary spanners need to feel they have the support of their manager (Rayburn and Gilliam 2016). Unfortunately, clarity of what actually constitutes sales manager support is still lacking.

Equally troubling is the lack of clarity about sales manager participation in the selling process. Pass, Evans, and Schlacter (2004) examined participation by salespeople in management initiated endeavors. Other research suggests that salespeople are sensitive to the terms, origins, and behaviors within interactions with sales managers; so things like ethics, expectations, and culture seem to matter (Choi, Dixon, and Jung 2004; Pettijohn, Keith and Burnett 2011). These studies did not look at participation by sales managers in the sales process. Instead, sales manager participation in selling processes has been limited to a very narrow perspective. Research mostly takes a mechanistic approach to participation by defining it as frequency of working with salespeople or even more granularly as monitoring of salespeople (Murphy and Li 2012). Classifying such activities as participation is problematical since these capture only interaction regularity and ignore interaction type and quality.

Thus, while support and related activities have received some detailed, though disjointed, attention in the literature, participation has largely been relegated to how often the sales manager interacts with salespeople. How sales managers implement support and participation will determine its reception by salespeople, which will impact relationships, sales behaviors and sales performance (Paparoidamis and Guenzi 2009; Schwepker, Schultz, and Good 2014). Sales managers

and researchers require deeper knowledge of what support and participation mean to salespeople and how these should be implemented to optimize relationships and performance.

METHOD

This research builds on current knowledge through qualitative inquiry "to develop a holistic framework that integrates insights from our fieldwork with existing literature" (Workman, Homburg, and Gruner 1998, p. 26). Using thematic analysis, this research compares emerging themes with extant literature. Such analytical techniques address the drawbacks of purely inductive or deductive approaches by iteratively exposing existing and emerging theoretical frameworks to empirical review (Dubois and Gadde 2002). Meshing extant research with emergent findings prevents unneeded construct proliferation, thus permitting programmatic research and comparison of results (Gilliam and Voss 2013). This is a useful and acceptable approach in sales and other organizational front-line research (e.g., Ferrell, Gonzalez-Padron and Ferrell 2010; Krush et al. 2014; Rayburn 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process was iterative and emergent (Creswell 2007), allowing refinement of data collection protocols. The initial protocol contained two grand tour questions: How would you describe sales manager support? And, how would you describe sales manager participation? Each was followed with probing and clarification questions. The final question protocol formalized early probing questions (appendix). All participants were asked to discuss only their current sales position to ease recall and to obtain a more accurate picture of their experiences with sales manager participation and support.

Purposive sampling using the snowball sampling technique identified experienced individuals for interviews (Bauman and LeMeunier-Fitzhugh 2015; Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Creswell 2007; Gilliam and Rayburn 2016; Krush et al. 2014). Participants were professional salespeople whose primary role was customer interactions. Data were collected from 33 participants over three data collections, which is within

Table 1: Research Participants

Participants	Gender	Experience High/Low (<5 years)	B2B vs. B2C
Beth	Female	Low	B2C
Brandt	Male	High	B2B
Brian	Male	High	B2B
Buddy	Male	High	B2B
Carolyn	Female	High	B2B
Chelsea	Female	Low	B2B
Cheryl	Female	Low	B2B
Cheyenne	Female	High	B2B
Cliff	Male	High	B2B
Dan	Male	High	B2B
Darrel	Male	High	B2B
Deanna	Female	Low	B2B
Jason	Male	Low	B2B
Joe	Male	High	B2B
John Q.	Male	High	B2B
Jonathon	Male	High	B2B
Jordan	Female	Low	B2C
Lakota	Female	High	B2B
Larry	Male	High	B2B
Marcus	Male	High	B2B
Mark	Male	High	B2B
Meagan	Female	Low	B2C
Ray	Male	Low	B2B
Roberto	Male	Low	B2B
Shayne	Female	High	B2C
Susan	Female	Low	B2C
Suzanne	Female	Low	B2C
Taylor	Female	Low	B2C
Tim	Male	High	B2C
Tom	Male	High	B2B
Victoria	Female	High	B2B
Walter	Male	High	B2C
Zach	Male	Low	B2C

the recommended range of 20-45 participants. More importantly, data collection continued until data were saturated and no new insights emerged (Bauman and LeMeunier-Fitzhugh 2015; Creswell 2007). Both B2B (n=23) and B2C (n=10) salespeople were included for increased breadth of perspectives and cross pollination of research insights. Male (n=19) and female (n=14) salespeople participated with tenure from eighteen months to twenty-five years. See Table 1 for details.

Interviews occurred during working hours to improve participant recall and in private to encourage honest discussion. Researchers interviewed in person and via telephone; telephone interviews work well for brief semi-structured interviews, permit access to hard-to-reach participants and yield comparable insights to face-to-face interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). Interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes while averaging 20 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The researchers independently analysed the data. Analysis included open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell 2007). Open coding identifies concepts and dimensions in the data and groups them into categories. Axial coding groups conceptually similar codes into higher order themes. Selective coding identifies linkages among emergent themes. Researchers shared findings and multiple discussions were held to ensure convergence. Minor interpretive differences were resolved during these discussions. No notable differences were identified based on type of salesperson, B2B versus B2C, or based on gender. Minor differences emerged based on tenure, particularly with respect to participation; these divergent cases were included to broaden and strengthen the emerging framework. This suggests the resultant framework will be useful both for practitioner action in sales organizations and for further academic research across sales contexts and organizations.

FINDINGS

This section illuminates findings from the data resulting in a holistic framework of sales manager support and participation. In this section we answer our research questions. We start with salespeople's description of

sales manager support and participation then discuss proposed antecedents and consequences. Table 2 gives an overview of the coding of the core phenomena.

Sales Manager Support

Though not the initial aim of the research, the data empirically supported House's (1981) conceptualization of sales manager support. Rather than creating confusingly similar new constructs, employing the existing constructs serves researchers better (Gilliam and Voss 2013). Support comes in three forms – instrumental, emotional and informational. Instrumental support allows salespeople to do their ordinary daily tasks. Here the sales manager is doing the basic work that may often be unseen or simply expected by the sales staff. This provides an underpinning that builds confidence to get salespeople through their day.

This can be as simple as making sure that the salespeople have their marching orders and deadlines.

> *[He] supports me basically with deadlines and making me feel comfortable that everything can get done.* – Jordan

> *Her role is to make sure that I have enough appointments and bring in enough dollars every week to make our sales goals.* – Deanna

> *Giving me the tools to make it happen and to meet both of our goals.* – Larry

Support can also be helping to navigate daily tasks and decisions.

> *I don't want to say fixing problems, but finding the right people - the right resources to go to can be difficult.* – Carolyn

> *Someone who can break down walls internally so I can get what I need to satisfy my customer's requirements.* – Cliff

> *We can go to him if we have questions.* – Tom

Salespeople thus find instrumental support - knowing what to do, how, and when - a great boon when done well and a significant impediment when missing or done poorly.

Table 2: Coding Process of Core Phenomena

Open Codes (Participant Voices)	Axial Codes (First-order Theme)	Selective Code (Second Order Theme)
Giving me the tools to make it happen and to meet both of our goals.	Instrumental Support	Sales Manager Support
[He] supports me with deadlines and making me feel comfortable that everything can get done.		
Daily support and encouragement.	Emotional Support	
We have daily huddles, it's a lot of motivation.		
Difficult customers, selling a certain policy, if the answer isn't there we can go to him.	Informational Support	
The manager gives technical support.		
...support for any product malfunction or product problems the customer has and product information	Solutions	Sales Manager Participation
For example, the other day I had an issue, so, problem solving for sure and with him helping problem solve		
My manager gives me training on a monthly basis, new systems and new features that might have rolled out	Training	
If I were the sales manager I would be more hands on, do more training...being new, I would benefit from those things		
He has helped me find prospects, new leads, attended a trade show for me.	Sales Calls	
Sometimes it is good to take the sales manager out to meet people.		

Within emotional support salespeople talked about three things – listening, empathy, and motivation – all are quite intertwined. Regardless of the form taken, emotional support is important and salespeople notice when it is missing.

> *I feel like there is support in most organizations, but I feel there is resistance in providing [emotional] support in some.* – Suzanne

> *We need moral support.* – Jason

> *They support me when I have an angry customer or partner, whatever, and they're in the wrong and I'm not [laughs].* – Carolyn

> *If we make a bad one [decision]… it is still important that he still supports me on that decision even though they might want to change that decision.* – Buddy

Emotional support starts with managers listening when needed. Listening is sometimes simply a friendly or confident ear. In other cases, listening is the gateway to sales manager action. In any case, it is about the salesperson reaching out and the sales manager being there.

> *I can call him and vent to him, and I know that I would never be risking my job or anything. He definitely supports my emotional needs, whatever I need. Where if somethings not going well, he definitely is there to calm me and talk me down off the ledge.* – Cheyenne

> *What she does is listen really well to what I say and she actually does things with what I say.* – Victoria

> *The managers in my department are pretty invested in like your life. Like they want to know what's going on… what's new, where do you really want to go like where-what is your goal in like five, ten years down the road. So they're pretty invested in your career path as well.* – Carolyn

> *[So does that play into emotional support?] Sure, I let him know everything that I am doing and he trusts me.* – Tom

Listening gives way to empathy. This leads to a deeper connection in the interaction because the manager is now emotionally engaging the salesperson and feeling with them.

> *She is there with guidance and empathy.* – Zach

> *He has empathy and knows the situations that I go through.* – Ray

> *It means that I can go to him and we can talk and talk through our goals and the communication is important to me.* – Joe

Beyond listening and empathy, salespeople often need support in the forms of motivation and encouragement.

> *Daily support and encouragement.* – Brian

> *We have daily huddles, it's a lot of motivation.* – Susan

> *I work harder [because] of the support that I'm getting.* – Meagan

When feeling emotionally supported salespeople feel ready to get the job done.

Another aspect of support is informational. Often when salespeople come to the manager with a need it is about uncovering a missing fact to fulfil a customer's needs.

> *Information I need and questions I have.* – Jonathon

> *Difficult customers, selling a certain policy, if the answer isn't there we can go to him.* – Susan

> *I can go to him and find the answer to a question. The manager gives technical support.* – Tim

> *We learn about the styles coming in and the design inspiration so we can tell our customers.* – Beth

Regardless of the form taken, it is important to note that salespeople are in reality the root of the call for support. Support, and participation, is something that salespeople ask for and expect.

Participation

Participation, like support, is considered effective when targeted toward solving perceived or actual problems. The key difference between support and participation is the active involvement of the manager in the selling process. However, participation can be perceived as a negative.

As salespeople discuss participation, there are subtle differences that emerge based on salesperson tenure. Salespeople say that sales manager participation can be a good thing. However, more senior salespeople are much more explicit that overall they should be left alone - unless they have a problem. Newer salespeople more readily admit that participation can be helpful to them as they learn to do their job.

> *Oh no, I need it [participation] and I want it.* – Ray (low experience)

> *Hopefully we are making those right decisions and the main thing for support would be timely response from him and getting some time with him if you need five minutes and they need to be able to trust us. Also helping analyze poor decisions I have made.* – Jason (low experience)

> *Well me being the senior man…I am willing to make the decisions but sometimes I want their input.* – Joe (high experience)

Solutions must be created in real time for customers. This is where managers are often called upon to participate.

> *When it comes to running my own territory, and being out here talking to my own customers and all that he lets me take the reins. But I know that when, for example the other day I had an issue, so, problem solving for sure and with him helping problem solve it helps me with my skill set and product knowledge.* – Chelsea

> *More around the larger sales opportunities that I have, I include him in on where we stand, and the hurdles that we have to overcome to try and win that opportunity.* – Cheryl

Beyond specific problems that emerge during the selling process, change is inevitable. New information is available, products evolve, customer needs morph; all of these require continued training and development. Salespeople acknowledge this and describe how managers take an active role in their personal and professional development.

> *My manager gives me training on a monthly basis, new systems and new features that might have rolled out.* – Beth

> *If I were the sales manager I would be more hands on, do more training… I would benefit from those things.* – Jonathon

> *[Learning] comes down to the weekly meeting you have with my manager. I talk about what I want to improve on, and then she implements ways that I can improve on that, whether it's just skills and drills throughout the week, or on something that I can read.* – Taylor

Training and development also include real-time feedback about performance and activities relateded to selling in the field.

> *Today my manager was with me all day today, so like after every appointment that we would have she would kind of watch how I would do it, and she would kind of give me feedback.* – Meagan

> *Oh yeah, so like I said with the problem solving it's really good because it [participation] is helping me improve my skills.* – Chelsea

> *If I need it and how she would do that is basically just role playing the situation that I would need help with.* – Zach

Real-time feedback is so important, it is noticed when missing.

> *Providing me some a little bit more feedback of how I did in a sales calls. I guess I would kind of want more criticism than he likes to give. He's always the one to say good job but sometimes you know we need the criticism too.* – Cheyenne

Part of participation includes ride-alongs. This is often where the activities described above occur. Sometimes, this includes manager participation in selling processes. This can benefit salespeople.

> *He has helped me find prospects, new leads, attended a trade show for me…he ended up showing the customer the line and filled that order.* – Jonathon

> *Sometimes it is good to take the sales manager out to meet people.* – Marcus

However, if the manager doesn't know his/her role or they try to take over, ride-alongs can go bad, even when the sale is made.

When [he] came in to ride with me, he just sat and listened. And that's what a manager should do, in my mind. Just, don't take over the sales call like [the other manager] does and just basically embarrass you…don't appear overbearing to the customer. – Brandt

[We were] coming into a sales call my manager wanted to go with me and he eventually wanted to pretty much takeover the whole meeting…pretty much cost us the deal. – Suzanne

Salespeople seem to feel that sales managers need to understand that "…customers only need one voice communicating to them." (Tim). When participation goes too far, as in these examples, it feels controlling and frustrates salespeople. Salespeople call this micromanaging and they do not appreciate it.

Listening in on calls, micromanaging me, gets in the way. – Marcus

One day, I got a matter of probably ten emails from her alone saying like please do this, please do this, and it's like thank you for participating, but actually I know what to do. I have a lot more other stuff than your things to do so just tell me what's urgent. So, there's that difficulty sometimes where it's like do this, this and this. – Jordan

It's micromanagement, I call it archaic management. – Brandt

Participation may be for key accounts or new sales. – Dan

As will be seen in the ensuing discussion, salespeople want to be free to do their jobs.

Antecedents to Effective Support and Participation

For support and participation to balance and work effectively, sales managers and salespeople must bring different characteristics to the interaction. First and foremost, everyone has to know their role and do their part.

The sales manager and the salesperson know their roles and do not cross boundaries. – Tim

You know I trust that when I'm not hearing him he's still doing his job. – John Q.

Managers also need to know what is going on in the salesperson's world.

I feel there's a big disconnect in all managers and other people I've talked to that are in sales. Between the sales reps and the managers, the managers haven't been down in the trenches in years and everything has changed. – Suzanne

I think it is critical, my superior having that experience of traveling helps; he has that empathy and knows the situations that I go through and it will play into that thought process. – Ray

Sometimes managers can be a little bit more ambitious or pie in the sky when you get to these objectives, but they don't really know what exactly it takes to get there. That can be a little frustrating. – Roberto

Once everyone knows what is expected of them and what's going on, mangers should consistently communicate, respect and enforce role boundaries.

Sales Manager Characteristics

Managers must be available, this means being there when needed and responding efficiently and effectively.

I can text him, call him, email him twenty-four-seven; he is very responsive, very knowledgeable. He is a good manager, very supportive. – John Q.

Yeah he's really accessible which is the best thing when it comes to having the support manager. – Chelsea

Any absence of, or resistance to, being available and actively helping through requested support or participation is a negative.

I will say that I think it would be healthy for my relationship with my manager if we had a little more interaction and engagement, so that he can lead me, and coach me to be a better salesperson. – Lakota

I have a friend who works at a different office, and she hated it just because specifically her sales manager was never available - he would only talk to them over IM. – Susan

From being available, relationships can deepen and evolve into mentorship. Through mentoring salespeople learn and grow.

The manager is perfect. He knows exactly what to do. He knows how to work with what we're doing, my sales position. He knows the process of what I'm doing with the customers that I'm dealing with. It's that he's experienced and that experience pays off. – Roberto

It is always good to learn from someone who has done it for eight years before I even got here; it is a good learning process. – Deanna

She's a great mentor. – Jordan

This is more than training, this is a relationship.

He is very helpful, very supportive, and we are growing in our relationship, both professionally and personally. He is a great mentor. – John Q.

From this discussion, we can draw the conclusion that specific sales manager characteristics will lead to more appropriate and successful support and participation in the sales manager-salesperson interaction. Therefore:

P1: Sales manager role knowledge, availability, and mentorship will be positively related to effective support and participation.

Salesperson Characteristics

The desire of salespeople to be engaged by managers as fellow participants is not surprising given prior research (Hwan Choi, Dixon, and Jung 2004; Pass et al., 2004). Much like managers need role knowledge to guide the sales process, one of the first things salespeople talk about is the need to know what is expected of them as they enact the sales process.

Yeah, oh yeah man, I think that's very important to know what the expectations are for both the sales rep and the sales manager. – Shayne

I want you up there making sure that I see what's coming up. That you can relay to me what you see on the horizon. – Brian

It would be healthy for my relationship with my manager if we had a little more interaction and engagement, so that he can lead me, and coach me to be a better salesperson. – Cheryl

Once they know what is expected, salespeople need autonomy, the freedom to do their job.

Good support is trust me and give me the responsibility and authority to make decisions on my own. – Walter

If you are in sales, you have to have autonomy. – Lakota

It's very important to have guidance of what is expected of you, but you also have to have the freedom to execute. – Brian

Finally, experience is a key aspect of how support and participation should manifest according to salespeople. As mentioned previously, new salespeople often realize they benefit from help while experienced salespeople want more control over interactions.

Someone who has twelve years' experience is going to get something [different] than somebody that is new. – Brandt

Because someone that is new needs more support and participation. – Larry

Since I've been here for four years, I do what needs to be done. She doesn't ride with me as much anymore; at the beginning, yes, about every eight weeks she was riding with me at least two days. Now that I'm getting, you know, she has newer people that need help. – Deanna

From this discussion, we can also draw the conclusion that specific salesperson characteristics will lead to more appropriate and successful support and participation in the sales manager-salesperson interaction. Therefore:

P2: Salespeople's knowledge of expectations, autonomy, and experience will be positively related to effective support and participation.

Sales Manager-Salesperson Trust

Beyond these characteristics and behaviors of sales managers and salespeople, there is a key piece of the puzzle that is important to appropriate and successful support and participation for everyone – mutual trust.

> *If I didn't trust his judgement and if I didn't trust his knowledge then I wouldn't want him to participate with me, because I would think he's gonna mess me up, or he didn't know the account like I did or something like that., but I trust him very much and I know that anytime that he's riding with me it's not necessarily to judge me, but it's to help me.* – Cheyenne

> *When they don't fully trust you it poses more problems.* – Taylor

> *I think that is how things work, she trusts me because I get numbers … and I trust her because she leaves me alone ... yeah I think that trust is something that's key to my overall success and my happiness with the culture here.* – Victoria

> *The main thing for me the manager could do is to back up what I say and trust me to make the right decision.* – Dan

Based on our data, mutual trust is the foundation of sales manager-salesperson interactions. As such we can suggest that mutual trust is vital to appropriate and successful use of support and participation in sales manager-salesperson interactions. Therefore:

P3: Mutual trust facilitates sales manager-salesperson interactions and will be positively related to effective support and participation. Mutual trust will influence sales manager and salesperson characteristics exhibited in the relationship.

Salesperson Behaviors

Finally, salespeople insist there are two additional guiding points to when support and/or participation are useful. These are specific to the salesperson: salesperson requests and salesperson performance. Salespeople acknowledge they will need manager's help from time to time. However, they want control of how and when this happens.

> *I am comfortable enough that if I need something I can go to my sales manager and get what I need.* – Cliff

> *Participation can be micromanaging, only be there when needed.* – Mark

In reality, salespeople often want sales manager support and participation when it is needed. This is explicitly connected to performance.

> *There should be a correlation between the time you spend with your manager and your performance really. My manager is very hands-off which fits my work style, so as long as you're a team member that's hitting their numbers and transparent about your work, and you know, you're leaving good notes in salesforce or whatever.* – Victoria

> *We did that [ride along] one time when we were first starting, and she does that with some of the other team members that aren't, maybe aren't doing as well. She'll do that as an on-going exercise.* – Shayne

> *If you're not hitting your expectations and your goals, then you're probably going to get micromanaged.* – Taylor

It is often when performance falters that salespeople request help.

> *It's usually if I need the involvement I go ask for it.* – Larry

> *If the salesman is doing their job, has growing numbers and meeting expectations…leave him alone…if there is a guy struggling…help him!* – Marcus

Based on the data, we can draw the conclusion that specific salesperson behaviors will influence the application of appropriate and successful support and participation in the sales manager-salesperson interaction. Therefore:

P4: Salespeople's requests (positively) and performance (negatively) will moderate the effect of the sales manager's and salesperson's characteristics and their mutual trust on effective support and participation.

Consequences of Effective Support and Participation

Salespeople differentiate between support and participation. They also discuss both as imperative to their personal success. Sales manager support and participation are intimately intertwined. It is important to remember that salespeople want control in the process. When support and participation are executed effectively it builds stronger relationships between sales managers and salespeople. Just as trust impacts support and participation, these in turn build deeper trust and thereby stronger relationships between salespeople and their managers. This is an iterative process.

> *If you don't have trust, you don't have a relationship…if you don't have support, you don't have a manager.* – Roberto

> *I would say her participation, [it] strengthens our relationship…I know she's there if I need her.* – Zach

> *Good support would be trust and giving me the responsibility and authority to make decisions on my own and not to micromanage me.* – Darrel

Support and participation also have a considerable effect on salesperson performance and salespeople are quite blunt about this. As with trust, support and participation are both influenced by and will influence salesperson performance. Again, as the process plays out there is an iterative effect.

> *It [support] dramatically affects your performance.* –Lakota

> *I would say you know definitely making me like work harder with all the support that I'm getting… and, like I said I think [participation's] really helpful, like I mean like my first and second month I did like really good…which is not very common.* – Meagan

> *I think that it definitely benefits my performance in the – and my perception of the company and the culture definitely improves and yeah, it's a good thing all around for me.* – Shayne

> *I don't know if you can have one without the other or if I would want one over the other but I think support is the foundation. If you don't have support it doesn't matter what happens.* – Cliff

The data thus revealed that timely, balanced, and well-directed support and participation will positively impact both relational and sales performance outcomes for salespeople. Therefore:

P5: Sales manager support and participation, when executed as detailed above, will be positively related to sales manager-salesperson relationships and to salesperson performance.

DISCUSSION

There is a long running interest in sales manager support of sales staff. Participation, though less widely explored, is closely related and important as well. We offer a holistic framework of sales manager support and participation grounded in insights from salespeople (see Figure 1). It is sensitive to the variety of earlier conceptions of support and participation and brings order and nuance to these constructs while including related phenomena. This framework and propositions provide a starting point for further inquiry.

Theoretical Implications

We observed in the field empirical evidence of House's (1981) tripartite conception of support. Instrumental, emotional and informational support thus remains a viable framework for further research into sales manager support. Use of existing constructs is very helpful as it maintains comparability across research programs thus aiding programmatic research. By providing current empirical support for the House framework, the research demonstrates that it can replace the narrow or mechanistic operationalizations of support highlighted in the literature review.

The emergent constructs for participation can provide for the first time a concise but complete set for examining sales manager-salesperson interactions. They are significantly more nuanced than the mechanistic notions of frequency currently in the literature. Researchers can use the framework to explore the impact of participation in relationship building and performance. Perhaps just

Figure 1: A Proposed Framework of Sales Manager Support and Participation
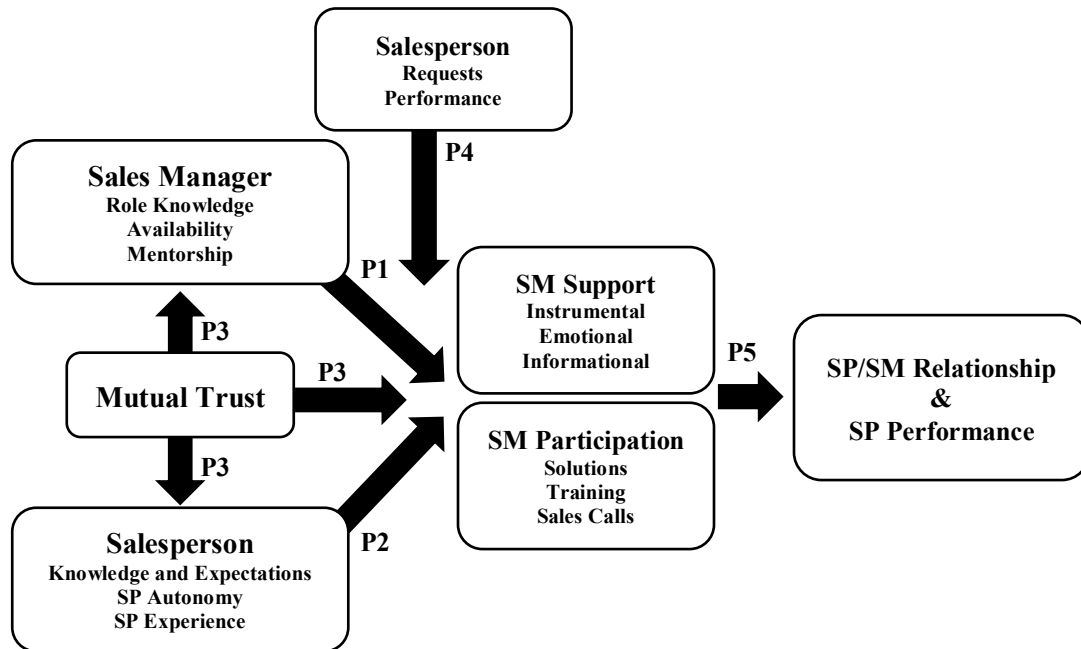
as importantly, we are unaware of any research showing the dark side of participation when poorly executed. Salespeople viewed participation as value-destructive when done poorly.

In exploring when sales managers will engage in support and participation, the framework includes the potential influence of sales manager's characteristics, mutual trust and salesperson behaviors. These are considered valuable constructs in sales management research and should prove useful in further isolating boundary conditions of effective support and participation. The expansion to two-way mutual trust rather than one-way measures may be particularly important. In fact, the research revealed the extremely iterative nature of the framework's operation, which may prove a hindrance to quantitative approaches. We suspect that further research may reveal many feedback loops and/or three way interactions (moderated moderation).

Managerial Implications

Successful value co-creation via support and participation requires bilateral role knowledge; this includes sales managers staying abreast of their salespeople's realities.

Knowing the current situation in the field heightens a manager's usefulness to the salesperson, which may be an undervalued benefit of ride-along participation. The manager must then establish, communicate and continually update role boundaries that mesh well with these realities. If a boundary must be crossed, such as the sales manager dictating an activity or dominating a sales call, the manager should seek buy-in beforehand through explaining how this will promote success.

Salespeople expressed a desire to be coached, mentored and assisted without being micromanaged. Thus, managers must properly calibrate support and participation levels to individuals. This ensures their salespeople perceive them as available but not micromanaging. The key variables for salespeople were expectations, desire for autonomy, and experience. Salesperson experience particularly influences the desire, but not always the need, for both support and participation. Salespeople can be reluctant to exhibit needs, particularly for emotional support. Anticipating rather than reacting to personal problems, encounters with difficult customers or frustration with processes should be beneficial.

Interestingly, showing concern can prove very valuable even when potential interventions are limited. For instance, just listening and empathizing as a salesperson talks can calm them down while building mutual trust. Managers must recognize and counter their own discomfort with providing emotional support so they can act quickly and appear authentic. Honest recollections of troubles the manager saw while in the field may help in showing empathy when difficulties occur.

Providing access to the right people along with timely help with processes and access to resources topped the list for instrumental support. Informational support is a base expectation among salespeople. Salespeople do not wish to stop their work to search for resources or information. They view the manager as more capable of meeting such needs to boost value co-creation and thus performance. The manager must justify actions as value co-creation not merely interference. Properly timed, calibrated and well-justified support and participation clearly raised salespeople's effort and expectations of performance.

When participating in the sales call, not only may managers gain tacit situational knowledge but salespeople see it as an opportunity. They seek feedback, receive training and provide a level of comfort to customers through accessing managers. The salesperson's buy-in and the manager's adherence to roles are the keys to success. In fact, it is more critical to tailor participation accurately to the individual case than it is for support. Salespeople seemed very sensitive to misapplied participation efforts, often disdaining them as micromanagement. Still, salespeople see quality help during participation as implying a long-term commitment by the manager. Such attention by itself may increase effort from the salesperson. Viewing participation as cooperative and reciprocal rather than just assistance may help the manager to set the right tone. In fact, mutual trust is unlikely to develop when such commitment and cooperation are lacking.

Limitations and Further Research

As with any qualitative research, generalizability is difficult. The study is limited in number of participants, industries and geography among other aspects. Naturally, researchers need to test the framework in a variety of contexts using different methods.

The research did spawn questions that could fuel further inquiries beyond the usual testing of the framework and search for boundary conditions. Participants often recognized span of control as a limiting factor for the sales manager. This and other environmental conditions for the sales manager should provide contextual issues to explore. For instance, sales manager compensation is probably an under-researched topic that impacts support and participation efforts.

Perhaps the key issue that arose for participation was its dark side. Though couched in very different terms, one might construe comments on poor support as also revealing the existence of a dark side. One way to view this is that poor participation is a sin of commission, whereas poor support is a sin of omission. Thus, even though salespeople may not be as direct in discussing it, support may also have a dark side that is worthy of exploration.

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APPENDIX

Final Question Protocol

How would you describe Sales Manager Support in your job?

How does your sales manager support you in doing your job?

> What helps or hinders support from your manager?

How does the support affect your relationship?

How does the support affect your performance?

How would you describe Sales Manager Participation in your job?

How does your Sales Manager participate with you in doing your job?

> What helps or hinders participation from your manager?

How does the participation affect your relationship?

How does the participation affect your performance?

What determines if the participation is successful or unsuccessful?