

An Exploratory Investigation into How Grit Influences the Leadership Practices of Sales Managers

By Arran Caza and Barry Z. Posner

This study examines the influence of the personality trait grit – the tendency to pursue long-term goals with perseverance and continuing passion – on the leadership behavior of sales managers. Data were collected from an international sample of 344 sales managers, who reported their level of grit and the frequency with which they engaged in transformational leadership behavior. Grit had a significant influence on how frequently sales managers reported engaging in leadership behaviors. It appears that the grit of sales managers influences their behavior as leaders, with greater grit resulting in greater frequency of leadership behaviors. These findings suggest practical implications for sales managers and their organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Sales is one of the hardest jobs in the world. No matter how fantastic a product or service may be, or how many calls and meetings salespeople schedule, at the end of the day, they cannot force a prospect to buy or successfully close every deal. This difficulty is increased by having to deal with stereotypes held by many buyers that stigmatize salespeople as manipulative, pushing products or features that are not needed. As a result of their unique role at the boundary between the organization and customers, salespeople may be especially vulnerable to role stress (Brashear, Lepkowska-White and Chelariu 2003; Brown and Peterson 1993). All of these challenges cause relatively high turnover rates among sales staff and represent a source of significant cost for organizations (Brashear, Manois and Brooks 2005).

Leadership offers a potentially powerful remedy for the challenges faced by salespeople. Research findings show that sales managers can have great influence on sales reps and their performance (Arthur, Bennett, Edens and Bell 2004; Deeter-Schmelz, Goebel and Kennedy 2008; Inyang, Agnihotri and Munoz 2018; Reid, Plank, Peterson and Rich 2017). As Vazzana

(2016) notes, “Organizations are rapidly coming to the same conclusion: sales managers are the key lever in driving improvement in sales. Whether a company targets higher market share, better account penetration, or some important outcome, sales managers are the principal mechanism for success.” Indeed, leadership, especially transformational leadership, has long been recognized for its potential to reduce role stress and improve job satisfaction and performance among salespeople (Rich 1997; Teas 1983).

Given the importance of sales leadership in overcoming the challenges faced by staff, it is important to understand sales leaders’ behavior. Extensive research already has examined how different kinds of leadership behavior influence salespeople (e.g., Dubinsky, Yammarino, Jolson and Spangler 1995; Ingram, LaForge and Schwegker 2007; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko and Roberts 2009). What is less well-understood are the antecedents of sales leader behavior. In particular, even though the study of leadership began by focusing on traits (Northouse 2012), that approach fell out favor for a long time, and has only recently begun to enjoy a renaissance (e.g., Judge, Bono, Ilies and Gerhardt 2002). As a result, relatively little is known about how leaders’ traits influence their subsequent behavior in general (Caza and Posner 2017), and this lack is particularly apparent in the context of sales leadership (Plank, Reid, Koppitch and Meyer 2018). In sum, while a great deal is known about how leadership behavior influences salespeople, far less is known about when and why any particular leadership behavior is likely to occur.

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The study reported here begins to address this gap. It examines the leadership implication of the personality trait of grit among sales managers. The results reveal how sales managers' level of grit influences their leadership, showing that gritty sales managers are more likely to engage in transformational leadership behavior. The findings thus help to explain the antecedents of sales leader behavior, a domain which is currently not well understood (Plank et al. 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grit in Sales

One potentially important personality trait that has been relatively unexplored in sales leadership is grit. Grit is defined as passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly 2007). It is a stable individual difference that reflects a person's ability to maintain passion despite a lack of positive feedback. As Duckworth (2016:54) asserts: "It's doing what you love, but not just falling in love – staying in love." Exemplary performance in any endeavor requires sustained effort and deliberate practice (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama and Ericsson 2011; Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer 1993), making grit potentially important in all contexts. Moreover, studies have shown that grit is not correlated with either intelligence or self-control (Duckworth and Gross 2014), that grit explains more variance in outcomes than does conscientiousness (Duckworth et al. 2007), and that grit involves more than one's work ethic (Meriac, Slifka and LaBat 2015) or the hardiness to endure setbacks (Maddi, Matthews, Kelly, Villarreal and White 2012). As a result, grit is a potentially important predictor of success.

Consistent with this reasoning, grit has been linked to positive outcomes across many contexts, including personal relationships, education, military training, and work performance (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal and Duckworth 2014). Individuals with more grit, from school children to athletes and artists, have achieved more success than their less-gritty counterparts (Duckworth 2016). Grit likewise explains retention levels in such varied endeavors as school, marriage, and military service (Eskreis-Winkler et al. 2014). And, most relevant to the current research, grit is similarly

important in sales contexts (e.g., Dugan, Hochstein, Rouziou and Britton 2018; Rodriguez, Boyer, Fleming and Cohen 2019).

Existing research suggests that grit will contribute to retention and success among salespeople, but no prior study has examined the role of grit in sales leadership. While individual salespersons' personalities and attitudes are important predictors of success, the environment in which they work also is important. And one of the most influential elements in a salesperson's environment is their sales manager (Arthur et al. 2004; Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2008; Inyang et al. 2018; Reid et al. 2017; Vazzana 2016). Unfortunately, an extensive literature review by Plank, Reid, Koppitch and Meyer (2018) found relatively little empirical study examining the actual leadership behavior of sales managers and highlighted the need for more research in this regard.

The current study sought to address this empirical gap by exploring the influence of grit on the leadership behavior of sales managers, building on exploratory work examining the connections between personality traits and leadership (e.g., Khoo and Burch 2008; Westerlaken and Woods 2013). Since grit is important in sales work, and preliminary evidence suggests that it may also influence leadership behavior (Caza and Posner 2019), knowing more about how grit influences the behavior of sales managers is a promising avenue for investigation. Little is currently known about how grit influences leadership, so exploring this topic has the potential to contribute to understanding more about the leadership process in general, as well as contributing to greater understanding of factors influencing the effectiveness of sales managers in particular.

Transformational Leadership

Leadership may be the most studied concept in all of social science, and among the many different views on leadership, transformational leadership is likely the perspective that has received the most attention (Northouse 2012). Following work by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), transformational leadership is a theoretical framework examining how leaders shape their followers' views and motivate them to pursue collective goals. Instead of using rewards and punishments, transformational leaders foster trust,

respect, and attachment (Yukl 1989). Transformational leadership has long been recognized for its potential importance for salespeople (Dubinsky et al. 1995). Empirical evidence has since confirmed this importance, linking transformational leadership to a variety of positive outcomes in sales contexts. Transformational leadership behavior fosters trust in the sales manager and promotes more ethical decision making (Schwepker and Good 2010). It helps to make salespeople more coachable (Shannahan, Bush and Shannahan 2013) and motivates them to work harder (MacKenzie, Podsakoff and Rich 2001). All of these effects ultimately allow transformational leadership to increase performance among sales staff (Shannahan et al. 2013; MacKenzie et al. 2001).

A variety of behaviors are part of transformational leadership, and they have been described in different ways, but all descriptions focus on the shared theme of how transformational leaders' behaviors change followers' attitudes and beliefs in ways that motivate them to perform at high levels (Mhatre and Riggio 2014; Podsakoff, et al. 1990). Most research on transformational leadership uses one of three frameworks: the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass and Avolio 1997); the Transformational Leadership Inventory (TLI; Podsakoff et al. 1990); or the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI; Posner and Kouzes 1988). Each of these approaches categorizes transformational leadership behavior in slightly different ways, but all three address the same underlying construct and are functionally similar in their relationships with other constructs (Bass and Riggio 2006; Mhatre and Riggio 2014).

The current study used the Leadership Practices Inventory, which is based on The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (Kouzes and Posner 2017) framework. The research leading to The Five Practices model began with case studies and systematic interviews with leaders and their constituents, across a wide variety of public and private sector organizations around the world, examining "personal best" experiences as leaders. These behaviors and actions were systematically analyzed and categorized into common themes or practices, and then subjected to various empirical analyses (Posner 2015). The Five

Practices framework has been in use for over 35 years, both in applied leadership development settings and in hundreds of research projects (Posner 2015, 2016). More than five million participants, representing over 180 countries, have completed surveys associated with The Five Practices framework, making it a clear-cut and well-established means of conceptualizing transformational leadership that has been used successfully across cultures (e.g., Amnuckmanee 2002; Caza and Posner 2017; Posner 2008; Zagorsek et al. 2004, 2006).

The focus of The Five Practices framework is on the behavior of leaders, not their intentions nor their attributes. A brief summary of each of the leadership practices follows:

Model the Way. Transformational leaders act in accordance with their stated goals and values. They set an example by demonstrating the behaviors they want from followers by engaging in them personally. They serve as role models.

Inspire a Shared Vision. Transformational leaders are future-oriented, articulating a clear vision that emotionally engage followers in achieving that aspiration. They link the visionary goal to followers' motivations and interests so that the goal becomes a shared one. This shared goal receives greater follower support, and is thus more likely to be attained.

Challenge the Process. Leading always involves disruptions, so leaders are more effective when they are able to embrace and promote change. Transformational leaders support a climate of experimentation and discovery, through achieving small wins, which contributes to learning and subsequent higher performance.

Enable Others to Act. Transformational leaders foster collaborative relationships and build trust between followers. They have high expectations about what people can accomplish, and take steps to strengthen the competence and confidence of their followers.

Encourage the Heart. Transformational leaders are cognizant of the socio-emotional needs of their followers, providing support and reinforcing success at both an individual and collective level. They link

rewards to desired performance so that followers' needs and collective goals are aligned.

Grit and Leadership

The current study was exploratory because little prior research has examined the role of grit in leadership, and none has examined its role among sales managers specifically. Nonetheless, there are reasons to believe that grit may contribute to transformational leadership among sales managers. For example, leaders with grit might be more willing to stand up for their principles and to take initiative, and in so doing serve as a role model for their followers (Model the Way). The perseverance arising from grit may not only motivate leaders in setting an example for others, but also highlight the importance of struggling-through to reach an aspiration that meets the objectives of both sellers and buyers (Inspire a Shared Vision). The passion of gritty sales managers can be imagined as making them more willing to experiment, accepting the risks inherent in leading from the front; with their commitment carrying them through the inevitable challenges and setbacks that arise (Challenge the Process). Moreover, grit's contribution to staying with a project through to the end could motivate sales leaders to build people's competence and self-confidence (Enable Others to Act). Sales managers who have endured and worked hard themselves may have greater appreciation for the persistence of others and understand the need to build a sense of community through celebration and recognition (Encourage the Heart). For these reasons, grit may well contribute to the transformational leadership behaviors of sales managers.

METHOD

Participants

The data used in this investigation were gathered by a private company that routinely helps firms and individuals assess their leadership behaviors through an online survey platform. Data were collected over a two-month period from people who indicated they were employed in sales and held a management position. Participation was both anonymous and voluntary. The sample included 344 sales managers, of which 218 were men and 126 were women. The majority were

between 26 and 45 years of age (61%) and had an undergraduate or graduate degree (67%). They were primarily Caucasian (77%), from the United States (83%), and employed full-time across a wide variety of industries (e.g., business services, finance, health services, insurance, manufacturing, retail trade, and utilities).

Measures

Respondents completed two instruments, in addition to providing demographic data. They completed the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI; Kouzes and Posner 2003; Posner 2016), which includes six behavioral statements to measure each of the five leadership practices (Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart). Ten-point Likert scales were used, with "1" indicating that the respondent "almost never" engaged in this particular behavior and "10" indicating that the person "almost always" engaged in the behavior. The 30 statements are descriptive, concerning the frequency with which the respondent acts in this manner, rather than evaluative (that is, not: "does this behavior well" or "needs to take more/less of this action"). Some examples of these statements are: "I set a personal example of what I expect from others" (Model), "I encourage others to share an exciting dream of the future" (Inspire), "I encourage experiments and risk-taking, even when there is a chance of failure" (Challenge), "I give people a great deal of freedom and choice in deciding how to do their work" (Enable), and "I give the members of my team lots of appreciation and support for their contributions" (Encourage). Ratings for the six items reflecting each leadership practice were summed to create a frequency score for that behavior.

The second instrument was the Grit Scale, which is a 12-item self-report measure assessing trait-level passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals (Duckworth et al. 2007). For example: "I have achieved a goal that took me years of work," and "New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones" (reverse scored). Respondents indicated how well each statement described them (for six statements the scoring is "1" = not at all like me to "5" = very much like me, and reverse-scored for the other six statements,

with “1” = very much like me to “5” = not like me at all”). Although the scale has two component factors, it has been shown to have better predictive power when used as a single, combined score (Duckworth et al. 2007), and most studies use a single-score for analyses (Crede, Tynan and Harms 2017). The current study did likewise, summing the ratings of the twelve items to calculate a grit score.

Table 1. Summary statistics and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age ^a	2.64	1.15								
2. Education ^b	4.59	1.15		-.02						
3. Grit	46.85	6.15	.79	-.01	.03					
4. Model	48.36	7.96	.80	.02	.12*	.46*				
5. Inspire	45.55	9.37	.86	.01	.12*	.36*	.81*			
6. Challenge	45.57	8.42	.79	.04	.17*	.40*	.77*	.80*		
7. Enable	50.42	5.4	.70	.06	.12*	.35*	.66*	.59*	.62*	
8. Encourage	48.88	8.38	.88	.03	.12*	.37*	.81*	.74*	.69*	.68*

N = 344.

a. Categorical variable: 1 = 18-25 years; 2 = 26-35 years; 3 = 36-45 years; 4 = 46-55 years; 5 = 56 years or older

b. Categorical variable: 1 = Some high school; 2 = High school graduate; 3 = Technical or trade graduate; 4 = Some university; 5 = College graduate; 6 = Graduate or professional degree

* $p < .05$

RESULTS

Table 1 provides summary statistics and correlations for all measures in the study. As shown in the table, all measures showed good internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha scores consistent with other prior studies (e.g., Duckworth et al. 2016; Posner 2015) and exceeding the standard .65 threshold for scale internal reliability (DeVellis 2003). Because all responses were collected from a single source, a factor analysis was used to assess the risk of common method bias in these data (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff 2003). A model with the predicted seven-factor structure (two grit dimensions and five leadership practices) explained over 58% of the observed variance and all factors had eigenvalues above the traditional cut-off of 1.0. Moreover, the first, unrotated factor explained less than 33% of the variance, and the observed correlations between grit and the leadership practices (in Table 1) were significant, but not so large as to threaten discriminant validity.

Table 2. Regression models

Variable	Model	Inspire	Challenge	Enable	Encourage
Intercept	19.81*	17.27*	16.08*	35.12*	24.64*
	(3.64)	(4.50)	(3.93)	(2.59)	(3.97)
Age ^a	.27	.27	.42*	.37	.35
	(.34)	(.42)	(.36)	(.24)	(.37)
Education ^b	.68*	.93*	1.13*	.49*	.79*
	(.33)	(.41)	(.36)	(.24)	(.36)
Gender ^c	-1.55	-.45	-.90	-1.11	-2.30*
	(.79)	(.98)	(.86)	(.57)	(.87)
Caucasian ^d	-.35	-1.64	-1.21	-.59	-.58
	(.93)	(1.15)	(1.00)	(.66)	(1.01)
Grit	.59*	.54*	.55*	.31*	.51*
	(.06)	(.08)	(.07)	(.04)	(.07)
R^2	.48	.39	.44	.39	.42
F	19.88*	11.79*	16.41*	11.93	14.13*
	(df 5, 338)	(df 5, 338)	(df 5, 338)	(df 5, 338)	(df 5, 338)

N = 344. Standard error in parentheses.

a. Categorical variable: 1 = 18-25 years; 2 = 26-35 years; 3 = 36-45 years; 4 = 46-55 years; 5 = 56 years or older

b. Categorical variable: 1 = Some high school; 2 = High school graduate; 3 = Technical or trade graduate; 4 = Some university; 5 = College graduate; 6 = Graduate or professional degree

c. Gender: 1 = Female; 2 = Male

d. Caucasian: 0 = Non-Caucasian; 1 = Caucasian

* $p < .05$

Ordinary least squares regression was used to assess between grit and leadership behavior. Five models were tested, one each with one of the five leadership practices as the dependent variable. Because there is a noteworthy difference of opinion in the literature concerning the role of demographic characteristics in transformational leadership behavior (cf., Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Van Engen 2003; Posner 2013), the analysis reported here controlled for the leader's age, gender, education and heritage. Even after controlling for these differences, grit was a significant predictor of the frequency of leaders' behavior in all five practices. Grittier sales leaders were more likely to engage in all transformational leadership behaviors.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how one desirable personality trait – grit – influenced the self-reported transformational leadership behaviors of sales managers. Using The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership framework (Kouzes and Posner 2017), the analysis showed that sales managers' grit was positively associated with greater frequency of modeling, inspiring, challenging, enabling, and encouraging leadership practices. In broad brush terms, it appears that grittier sales managers engage in leadership behaviors most frequently.

This relationship make intuitive sense, as grit's dogged perseverance and passionate pursuit of long-term goals should make sales managers more willing to stick with, stand up for, and live by their principles, be able to set their sights on future aspirations, inspiring others in the process to do the same, and making people on their team less risk-averse and more willing to learn from experience. The commitment that gritty sales managers have to their goals may make them more willing to enlist the aid of others, more likely to empower those others, as well as more comfortable with expressing their appreciation for the hard work and accomplishments of others. Overall, these results suggest that grit is generally an advantage for sales managers. Grit seems to prompt them to engage more frequently in the transformational leadership behaviors that have been shown to bring about exceptional outcomes (Dugan, Hochstein, Rouziou and Britton 2018; Rodriguez, Boyer, Fleming and Cohen 2019).

Although this study used a moderately large and diverse sample, it also had some limitations, which suggest promising directions for future research. For example, while the demographic characteristics of the sample population varied in many ways, it was still predominantly composed of well-educated Caucasian Americans who were willing to complete an online personality assessment. It remains to be seen if either of these factors, or possibly others (e.g., size of the sales team or nature of the industry), could influence the relationship between grit and leadership behavior, impacting the generalizability of the current findings. Second, because all the data were collected in a single survey, there is some risk of common method bias. It would be useful to replicate these findings using multi-source data. Third, it will be important to examine whether external factors influence the relationship between grit and leadership behavior. For example, it could be the case that grittier sales managers are given more challenging assignments and/or teams to supervise to begin with, so that they are required to engage in leadership behavior more frequently. Finally, the survey revealed nothing about the experiences of these sales managers, including their effectiveness. A promising direction for future research would be to investigate the impact that sales manager grittiness has on the sales team's retention and performance. For example, if grit makes sales managers more likely to engage in transformational leadership behavior, does it also make that them or their sales teams more effective?

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In sum, it appears that grit, or one's continuing passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals, is an important contributor to how the sales manager thinks about and acts as a leader. So, how do sales managers develop and sustain grit? A most succinct way to understand grit is to think of it as stamina, really sticking with things through disappointment and adversity, as well as staying keenly interested (never getting bored) with what you are doing (McGregor 2016). Consequently, most gritty people develop a sense of purpose in what they are doing and come to believe in the upmost importance of their interests and eventual worthwhile contributions.

Developing an organizational culture of grit, where sales objectives are relentlessly pursued, begins with the sales manager modeling this behavior, especially when sales outcomes are challenging to achieve. This is what it means, in leadership terms, for sales managers to set an example by their actions, which demonstrates that they live the values they espouse. It also means that they are not afraid of obstacles, mistakes or even setbacks, but embrace these as opportunities to learn, and challenges them to be even better the next time around. They apply this same perspective when the actions of their sales reps do not always go as expected. It is also true that salespeople are grittier when they believe that the work they are doing is meaningful (Makela 2017). This is especially critical in helping salespeople pick themselves back up when negotiations with a given prospect do not pan out or a deal with a long-term client does not materialize.

Sales managers need to get their sales team invested not just in making a sale or meeting a quota but in how the “customer/client” is going to be more effective because of what they are offering; this is where passion comes into play. Look up the word “passion” in a dictionary and it refers to an “intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction” but its original definition recognized an association with “suffering.” Sales manager have to get their sale reps fired up about the bigger picture, the why and worth of their products and services, and not just the what and cost-benefit, so that they’d be ready to be convicted, ready to sacrifice for the greater good.

The grittiest of sales managers echo the words spoken by President Teddy Roosevelt more than 115 years ago: “It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the

worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timed souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Tough love is an expression often applied to gritty sales managers and how they approach their sales teams. The data suggested that the grittiest sales manager both challenge sales reps and hold them accountable, and at the same time are genuinely supportive and appreciative. This yin/yang combination requires that sales managers get to know each sales rep on an individual basis, setting high standards backed by realistic rationale, and following through on promises and commitments. Time needs to be allocated for after-action reviews and post-modems where candid information is shared about what went well, and what could be improved, in subsequent sales efforts. For example, the Seattle Seahawks football team has “Tell the Truth Mondays” when they review film from the previous game and determine what they did wrong. On Tuesdays, they figure out what they need to do differently (Duckworth 2016).

Finally, since grit is all about being willing to keep going even if it gets hard or there have been setbacks, rather than giving up, sales managers need to develop a growth mindset for themselves and their sales reps (Frost 2018). This requires letting go of fixed mindset beliefs; that intelligence, character, imagination, etc. (on the part of the sales manager or sales reps) are firmly set, that people are essentially born with innate talents, and that their skills don’t change very much over time (Dweck 2006). Sales managers with a growth mindset are willing to take risks and push themselves because they do not believe that mistakes or falling short will define, or permanently scar, them. They set challenging goals, and carry around a glass half-full mentality versus the half-empty perspective of those with a fixed mindset. This viewpoint enables sales managers to aspire for perfection, while embracing greatness, and appreciating that sales goals are often comparable to being in a race without a finish line.

Researcher have shown that grit can be developed and those involved with training and development efforts with both sales people (possible future sales managers) and current sales managers (Duckworth

2016) may find this a promising area for increasing the overall effectiveness of sales organizations. On-the-job experiences can also promote grit, such as placing sales people in increasingly more challenging assignments that are likely to require both more grit and more leadership. Grit might also be one of the bases for pairing more and less experienced sales people together or in the creation of sales teams, as grit shows up in literally pushing people to continually increase their capacity and up their game.

In sum, grit, or the continuing passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals, is an important component of the sales manager's personality and influences how they behave as leaders. The greater the grit, the more frequent their use of leadership behaviors. The results from this preliminary investigation are instructive, call out for replication and expanding their generalizability, and have important practical implications for improving the performance of sales managers and their organizations.

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