



Regulation of emotions, interpersonal conflict, and job performance for salespeople



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ABSTRACT

Careers in sales involve stress, which often translates to role stress that negatively impacts performance. To address this important issue, the present research examines an antecedent of stress, salespeople's regulation of emotions and the impact on organizational outcomes. Study findings show that salespeople's regulation of emotions is conducive to reducing interpersonal conflict and felt stress, which eventually leads to higher performance. Also, findings show the favorable effect of salespeople's ability to regulate emotions in reducing felt stress is stronger at higher levels of vertical collectivism. Study results are outlined along with managerial implications, which have especially important implications for organizations operating in emerging countries.

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1. Introduction

Prior research indicates that the emotional demands of sales jobs and the multitude of interactions can lead to strain and impact job performance if not adequately managed. Research shows that salespeople's ability to manage their emotions in these situations is an important element of successful performance. Specifically, Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, and Sheng (2011) find that emotions, and the management of them, play a powerful role in sales by influencing a salesperson's attitudes and behaviors. Brown, Cron, and Slocum (1997) state that for salespeople, emotions are "a powerful psychological force that can affect behavior and performance in important ways" (p. 39) and guide goal directed behavior. In spite of this "—understanding of how emotions are interpreted and employed in marketing exchanges remains surprisingly limited" (Kidwell et al., 2011, p. 78).

In today's often ambiguous sales environment, management of emotions is critical for salespeople in the marketplace, as well as within the organization. In order for firms to increase performance, interfunctional coordination should be present. Narver and Slater (1990) describe interfunctional coordination as the organizational behavior of departments and individuals working together for the "coordinated creation

of customer value" (p. 21). Thus, meeting customers' needs and achieving organizational goals require individuals in different functional groups to pursue interdependent activities while channeling physical, verbal, and mental abilities towards a common goal. As the complexity of business relationships increase due to economic and technical changes, interdependency among functional groups in organizations is also growing. This is especially true for sales departments, as success with customers is dependent upon the salesperson's ability to work with other employees in the organization (Sheth & Sharma, 2008). Salespeople often take on the role of integrators to manage and orchestrate the flow of resources, in order to deliver compelling value propositions to customers (Workman, Homburg, & Jensen, 2003). Plouffe and Barclay (2007) state that "influence tactics – which include pressure, ingratiation, rational persuasion, and collaboration – are all potentially salient to the internally-directed dimension of the modern sales role" (p. 533). Needless to say, having the right attitude and interpersonal behaviors is important in developing smooth working relationships.

While firms generally strive for a smooth professional working environment, it is not uncommon to see employees resorting to argumentative behavior at work (Penney & Spector, 2005). In fact, these researchers find that almost 75% of negative interactions at work concern superiors, subordinates, and/or colleagues. Thus, when the relationship between individuals, especially in a work environment, is strained, the exchange of information becomes difficult and reduces the ability to work across departments or functions. Furthermore, personal conflict between employees can lead to non-cooperation, withholding of effort, and absence of helping and sportsmanship behavior (Narayanan, Menon, & Spector, 1999). Weiss and Cropanzano (1996)

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rely on affective events theory to show that employee's attitudes and behaviors are primarily impacted by events in the workplace. In addition, interpersonal conflict is known to cause dissatisfaction with the job itself, as well as lowering organizational commitment, which in turn impacts job performance (Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2011). To prevent this negative influence, firms and managers seek ways to improve interpersonal relationships and coordination among their employees. However, studies concerning ways in which to reduce interpersonal conflict are limited, particularly in sales settings.

To address these gaps in research, this study examines the role of salespeople's ability to manage emotions in the development of positive behavioral strategies. In particular, the current study focuses on the influence of regulation of emotions in avoiding interpersonal conflict, which in turn reduces felt stress and improves job performance. Numerous studies look at the impact of factors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, job satisfaction, and leadership style on salespersons' felt stress. Yet, few studies examine the role of emotional control on stress. In addition, the present study examines the role of vertical collectivism as a moderator of the relationships among these constructs. With the globalization of the business environment, cultural values play a greater role in individual employee's workplace attitudes and behaviors (Byrne & Bradley, 2007; Parboteeah & Cullen, 2003). As the growth in multinational corporations continues, researchers and sales managers must understand issues that impact salespeople operating not only within the United States (US), but also in markets outside the US with different cultural values. In reviewing research, this appears to be the first study using a model that integrates regulation of emotions and critical organizational variables, thus contributing to salespeople's success and well-being. Furthermore, the current research also makes an important contribution to the sales literature by examining the moderating role of vertical collectivism on (1) the regulation of emotions to felt stress relationship, and (2) the interpersonal conflict to felt stress relationship.

2. Conceptual background

Salovey and Mayer (1990) define emotional intelligence (EI) as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions” (p. 189). Emotional intelligence is a multidimensional construct which consists of a person's ability to perceive emotions, understand emotions, and use or regulate emotions (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). The three-branch model of emotional intelligence posits that emotional intelligence operates through a continuum that starts with emotional perceptions which precede the cognitive understanding of emotions and progresses to emotion regulation (Chien-Cung & Jaramillo, 2014; Joseph & Newman, 2010). Furthermore, this model also treats emotional regulation as a proximal antecedent of organizational outcomes (Chien-Cung & Jaramillo, 2014; Joseph & Newman, 2010).

Regulation of emotions is a key component of emotional intelligence that describes individuals' ability to manage self-emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Gross (1999) defines regulation of emotions as “the ways individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience or express these emotions” (p. 542). Urry and Gross (2010) present a process model of regulation of emotions to explain the processes underlying emotion regulation. Specifically, situation selection (i.e. choosing situations based on the emotions they will elicit), and cognitive change (i.e. reinterpreting the situation to alter the emotional response) precede the change of feelings and behaviors in the emotional-regulatory process model (Urry & Gross, 2010). In a sales context, when salespeople face a situation, their ability to regulate emotions allows them to manage their feelings and behavior based on their evaluation of other's (e.g., buyers, co-workers, and superiors) feelings and emotions.

Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, and Salovey (2010) state that regulation of emotions is most effective when individuals are able to assess their feelings accurately and adopt approaches to change negative feelings. Since emotions play a key role in cooperative behaviors, an individual's ability to understand and regulate their own emotions can be of immense help in building quality relationships with others (Lenaghan, Buda, & Eisner, 2007). This is of particular importance in sales, as salespeople have complex networks of colleagues and customers. Thus, the ability to work well with others, and build relationships, is especially important for sales success and business performance (Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011).

3. Theory and hypotheses

3.1. Interpersonal conflict

Effectiveness of employee performance and organizational success depends on a healthy and constructive work environment wherein people share information and resources, while also seeking and lending helping hands to each other (Narver & Slater, 1990). However, Grandey, Dickter, and Sin (2004) state that employee behaviors in the workplace have become less courteous and more disrespectful to others, resulting in tension with coworkers. Interpersonal conflict and its negative effect have been the subject of several studies (Harris et al., 2011; Spector & Jex, 1998). Sliter, Pui, Sliter, and Jex (2011) define interpersonal conflict at work “as a broad range of interpersonal mistreatment behaviors in the workplace, such as rude behavior, yelling, or other interpersonally deviant acts” (p. 427). Frone (2000) posits that interpersonal problems are a natural human phenomenon that occurs when people share a work environment and have strong but differing views about work issues or are competing for resources. Schieman and Reid (2008) state that interpersonal conflict “is one of the most prevalent and consequential stressors in the workplace” (p. 298). Research shows that role stressors (e.g., work load, role conflict, and role ambiguity), leadership style, and personality variables are among the most common sources of interpersonal conflict (Harris et al., 2011; Penney & Spector, 2005; Schieman & Reid, 2008; Sliter et al., 2011). Furthermore, interpersonal conflict at work evokes various negative emotions and outcomes, including: anger, anxiety, mis-trust, sabotage, and deviant behaviors (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Schieman & Reid, 2008).

Employees often vent their negative emotions by being rude to others at work (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Boles, 2011). Since “interpersonal conflict at work involves perceptions about exposure to negative forms of interaction” (Schieman & Reid, 2008, p. 297), a salesperson's ability to regulate their emotions is likely to lower interpersonal conflict. Salespeople who can adequately manage their emotions will likely use the ability to reduce conflict and defuse situations at work that involve or elicit conflict.

Moreover, research establishes that individuals with higher emotional intelligence have a more optimistic outlook, are confident, and generally project a positive image. Lenaghan et al. (2007) find a strong correlation between regulation of emotions and emotional wellness. Studies also show that emotionally intelligent individuals are better able to better handle threats to their positive attitude and self-esteem when facing negative situations (Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley, & Hollander, 2002). As a core component of emotional intelligence, regulation of emotions should help reduce the potential for interpersonal conflict. A recent meta-analysis demonstrates that the self-regulation aspect of EI positively relates to constructive conflict management, or the degree to which an employee avoids confrontation with others (Schlathreth, Ensari, & Christian, 2013). Based on this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1. Regulation of emotions is negatively related to interpersonal conflict.

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