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# Can salespeople lead themselves? Thought self-leadership strategies and their influence on sales performance

Nikolaos G. Panagopoulos<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jessica Ogilvie<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Marketing, The University of Alabama, 126 Alston Hall, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Marketing, The University of Alabama, Box 870225 Alston Hall, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Sales leadership has attracted a good deal of research attention during the past thirty years. Prior work, however, has largely taken a dyadic, interpersonal approach where leadership originating at one level (i.e., the sales leader) influences *others* (i.e., salespeople) thus paying no attention to the intrapersonal level whereby leadership originates within the individual with the purpose to influence *oneself*. Importantly, the realities of the modern sales position (e.g., self-managing teams, virtual work away from direct supervision) requires attention to other forms of leadership that may stem from and manifest at the individual level – namely, self-leadership strategies. Here we address this gap by focusing on a particular form of self-leadership – that is, thought self-leadership (TSL). We draw on social cognitive and self-regulation theories to ground hypothesis development and investigate the relationship between self-monitoring behaviors, TSL, self-efficacy, organizational-based self-esteem (OBSE), and salesperson performance. Findings from a sample of 301 salespeople in five companies demonstrate positive relationships between self-monitoring behaviors and TSL, TSL and self-efficacy, and self-efficacy and salesperson performance. Moderation analysis shows that TSL will result in higher levels of self-efficacy only when moderate to high levels of OBSE exist. Further, results suggest full mediation of self-efficacy on the relationship between TSL and salesperson performance. Theoretical and managerial implications of the study are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Academics and managers would certainly agree that successfully leading salespeople is an activity of utmost importance for the success of any firm. Through direction and coaching, sales leaders set goals for salespeople, align their activities with the objectives of the organization, and motivate them to perform well. It is thus not surprising that sales leadership has attracted a good deal of research attention during the past thirty years (e.g., Dubinsky, Yammarino, Jolson, & Spangler, 1995; Ingram, LaForge, Locander, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2005; Kohli, 1985; Tyagi, 1985) while continuing to offer novel insights to our discipline (e.g., Boichuk et al., 2014). The net outcome of this body of literature has been a significant enhancement of our knowledge regarding how leaders can affect salespeople's attitudes and outcomes through, for example, transformational leadership (e.g., MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Rich, 2001; Shannahan, Bush, & Shannahan, 2013) or supervisory behaviors (e.g., Kohli, 1989). Indeed, the recent meta-analysis of Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal (2011) demonstrates that leadership behaviors exert an important influence on salesperson performance. This recognition,

however, comes with the realization that all prior studies have approached the phenomenon of leadership from a top-down perspective in that leadership has been theorized to manifest at the level of a sales leader who is then directing her/his influence on salespeople. As such, studies investigating leadership in the sales domain have largely taken a dyadic, interpersonal approach where leadership originating at one level (i.e., the sales leader) influences *others* (i.e., salespeople) as opposed to focusing on the intrapersonal level whereby leadership originates within the individual with the purpose to influence *oneself*.

Though leadership manifested at higher levels of the sales organization is important, at least three realities of the modern sales position require attention to other forms of leadership that may stem from and manifest at the individual salesperson level. First, many salespeople work in physical, social, and psychological isolation from the firm for which they work (Ingram et al., 2005) thereby making activity less visible to management. Reduced proximity to management is further amplified today due to many firms' initiatives for salespeople to work in "virtual offices" where salespeople work from remote locations with fewer chances for interaction with their supervisors (Cascio, 2000). Presumably, isolation from management renders salespeople less readily susceptible to leadership, motivation, and coaching interventions that may result from manager–salesperson interactions as implied in the top-down approach to leadership mentioned previously. Fewer outlets of visibility and management intervention provide

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 205 348 8942.

E-mail addresses: npanagopoulos@cba.ua.edu (N.G. Panagopoulos),

jlogilvie@crimson.ua.edu (J. Ogilvie).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 205 348 8596.

greater occasion for salespeople to diverge from the firm's goals. Second, emerging trends in the design of the workplace – such as self-managing teams (e.g., Langfred, 2007) or employee empowerment initiatives (e.g., Pearce & Manz, 2005; Prussia, Anderson, & Manz, 1998) – necessitate that salespeople engage in some form of leadership behaviors that allows them to be self-empowered, self-motivated, and be able to deal with role ambiguity and task difficulty themselves (see Ingram et al., 2005). Finally, we recognize a growing emphasis on understanding leadership opportunities within the sales domain specifically because these organizations are often tasked with leadership challenges unique to the sales field. Sales organizations are presented with leadership needs, opportunities, and trials not routinely found in those organizations operating in less dynamic, less complex environments (Anderson, 1996). Indeed, “the dynamic nature of today's environment means that sales organizations will have to change continuously – sometimes dramatically” (Ingram et al., 2005, p. 150).

As a consequence of these realities, firms now seek alternative ways to enhance the capacity of sales employees to engage in leadership behaviors that will allow them to strive and keep abreast of an increasingly complex and ambiguous environment (Verbeke et al., 2011). One such strategy specifically empowers employees to engage in *self-leadership strategies* (e.g., Houghton & Neck, 2002; Manz, 1986, 1992; Manz & Sims, 2001). Importantly, self-leadership – conceptualized as a learned behavior because individual and managerial interventions can impact the extent to which individuals engage in the associated activities (Manz, 1986) – is gaining momentum among practitioners and researchers. Indeed, Ingram et al. (2005) have acknowledged the need for more research on self-leadership in their review of the sales leadership literature: “It will also be important for future research to assess the feasibility of implementing self-leadership for salespeople...” (p. 145). In considering new directions in sales leadership, this idea indeed presents “a more contemporary perspective” (Ingram et al., 2005, p. 137), reflective of new initiatives being undertaken by a multitude of companies in order to expand and develop leadership capabilities within their organization (Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000). Unfortunately, no research to date has addressed whether self-leadership is a viable strategy at the salesperson level, what factors motivate salespeople to engage in self-leadership, whether doing so has an impact on sales performance, and through what mechanisms or under what conditions self-leadership influences performance.<sup>2</sup> Though prior work has provided evidence that self-leadership, in general, is linked to increases in job performance (e.g., Prussia et al., 1998), remarkably very few attempts have been made to link thought self-leadership (a specific type of self-leadership) with performance. In addition, as noted by Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2011) in their review of the extant literature, most empirical research to date has paid less attention to whether individual-level traits, such as self-monitoring or organizational-based self-esteem, may influence and facilitate engagement in self-leadership.

Against this background, we seek to address these issues by focusing on the most advanced, distinctive, and promising type of self-leadership (Stewart et al., 2011; Williams, 1997) – namely, thought self-leadership – that involves self-influence at the individual level through employment of cognitive strategies of: self-talk, mental imagery, and the challenging of beliefs and assumptions (Neck & Manz, 1996). Due to the close nature of the customer-facing salesperson–customer relationship and resulting customer experiences and perceptions, we suggest that examining thought self-leadership (TSL, hereafter) at the salesperson level may provide relevant managerial implications as firms consider self-leadership strategies as an extension of employee

management and control. Because it is the individual employee who is of paramount theoretical importance in studying self-leadership (see Markham & Markham, 1995) and because TSL is a self-directed cognitive phenomenon occurring at the individual level, here we initiate the dialogue on self-leadership in sales by taking an individual perspective. In particular, we draw on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1991) and self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1998), which allow us to examine (a) the influence of self-monitoring on the practice of TSL; (b) the role of self-efficacy as a potential mediating mechanism in the relationship between TSL and sales performance; and (c) the moderating role of organizational-based self-esteem in the relationship between TSL and self-efficacy.

The following sections present the notion of TSL, its theoretical underpinnings, and how it relates to the rest of the constructs in our conceptual framework. Following formal hypothesis development, statistical modeling testing demonstrates findings from a sample of 301 salespeople across five companies. Resulting managerial and research implications are then discussed, and the paper concludes with an acknowledgement of study limitations and opportunities for future research.

## 2. Thought self-leadership

TSL involves the use and maintenance of constructive thought through specific mental strategies that include the use of (a) positive self-talk, (b) mental imagery, and (c) evaluation of dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions (Houghton & Jinkerson, 2007; Manz & Neck, 1999; Neck & Manz, 1992, 1996). Engaging in these cognitive strategies will contribute to the constructive thought process creation and maintenance (Neck & Manz, 1996) that assists salespeople in establishing the self-influence necessary for accomplishing task-related goals and thus increase individual sales performance. We explore the specific role played by each of the three constructive thought strategies below.

Through the use of positive self-talk, employees maintain a constant self-dialogue to influence positive emotional states and cognition (Ellis, 1988; Neck & Manz, 1992). Based upon what employees covertly tell themselves, they can encourage more optimistic self-dialogue and suppress negative or pessimistic self-talk (Houghton & Jinkerson, 2007). Consider, for example, a salesperson that engages in a constant self-dialogue that helps her identify or even redefine the individual goals and strategies that need to be pursued during customer interactions. These positive self-talk strategies influence employees' ability to self-lead through strategic cognitive thought patterns that regulate their goal focus and goal motivation. Because thought patterns tend to be reflective of habitual thinking (Houghton, Neck, & Manz, 2003), an individual's repeated chain of thoughts impacts the extent to which they develop constructive thought processes within the workplace. Therefore, employees that engage in increasing levels of positive self-talk can influence their positive thought patterns and be more apt to self-leadership roles.

Similarly, positive mental imagery impacts a salesperson's ability to self-lead by enhancing their constructive thought patterns. Mental imagery involves the creation and symbolic experiencing of imagined goal achievement (Manz & Neck, 1999). When salespeople engage in positive mental imagery they picture themselves experiencing the desired results of a specific behavioral process before actually engaging in the process or performing the necessary tasks for goal attainment (Houghton et al., 2003). Because self-regulation includes the reduction of discrepancies between current and desired states (Neck & Houghton, 2006), such purposeful focus on a desired state (as occurs with positive mental imagery) allows the employee to better monitor, compare and regulate current and desired states.

Finally, the third component of TSL involves the individual's ability to eliminate or alter dysfunctional beliefs (Manz & Neck, 1999). Through evaluating beliefs and assumptions, salespeople can actively promote positive thought processes by eliminating the negative beliefs and

<sup>2</sup> One might speculate that the slow adoption of the self-leadership concept by the sales academic community appears to resemble the situation with many interesting topics that have been discussed in the domains of applied psychology and/or organizational behavior for decades but have not found their way into the sales literature until only very recently (see, for instance, work on organizational identification, e.g., Wieseke, Ahearne, Lam, & Dick, 2009).

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