



## Understanding sales manager effectiveness Linking attributes to sales force values

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### Abstract

Although sales managers influence a variety of sales force outcomes critically important in the dynamic business environment of the 21st Century, research examining sales manager effectiveness is limited. As such, an investigation of the attributes of effective sales managers, as well as the impact of these attributes on the sales force, is warranted. To explore these issues, the authors employed value laddering, an in-depth interview technique that facilitates the identification of key attributes and the subsequent linkages of those attributes to consequences and underlying values or goals held by respondents. Data collected from sales professionals resulted in 308 ladders that were subsequently aggregated across subjects and used to generate a hierarchical value map (HVM) reflecting the associations among constructs. The HVM highlights the attributes of effective sales managers, as identified by respondents, and reflects three major sales management roles: communicator, motivator and coach. Each of these roles is explored and managerial and research implications are discussed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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### 1. Introduction

The role of the sales manager takes on new challenges as the sales force struggles with the dynamics of the current business environment that includes pervasive globalization, rapidly evolving technologies and electronic applications, as well as ever-closer customer partnerships [1,2]. Assuring that the sales force has the tools, training and guidance necessary to achieve the organization's strategic goals in this environment will require high-performing sales managers. As the critical link between the vision of an organization's upper management and the firm's revenue-generating personnel, the sales force, the sales manager plays an important role in the organization's ability to achieve its objectives, namely

those related to customer relationships, sales volume and profits [3,4].

Despite the increased demands upon sales management and the potential for these managers to influence a variety of organizational outcomes, previous research to understand sales manager effectiveness is scant. The limited research that does exist concentrates on identifying a broad range of traits or characteristics related to sales manager selection from the sales executive perspective [4] and from the human resources manager perspective [5]. In addition, a general set of competencies thought to contribute to the overall success of the sales manager has been identified from the management literature and from anecdotal evidence [3]. However, to accept these general competencies as significant for the role of sales managers, one must infer that the salient characteristics of managers in general are similar to the characteristics of sales managers, a notion that is not supported with empirical evidence [4,6]. Consequently, research investigating the personal attributes that contribute to sales manager effectiveness and the impact of those attributes on sales force performance would add substantially to understanding sales manager performance in today's environment of business [7].

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Our goal is to build upon the previous research and add depth to our understanding of sales manager effectiveness. Beyond identifying or creating a taxonomy of the characteristics of sales manager success, we are interested in a rich understanding of how such characteristics relate to consequences for the sales force and ultimately to the benefits or values these attributes offer the sales function. Hence, our research is guided by the following specific questions:

1. What are the common attributes found in effective sales managers in the current environment of business?
2. Why is each attribute important to the success of the organization and to salespeople?

To explore these questions, we employed value laddering, an in-depth interviewing technique. This format asks respondents to list attributes of a given topic and then uses a series of probing questions, typified by “why is that important to you?” Our goal was to determine sets of linkages between sales manager attributes, the consequences of those attributes and the underlying values important to the sales force. Consistent with our research questions, we strove to uncover the fundamental reasons why an attribute or consequence was important.

In this manuscript, we first review the literature investigating sales manager characteristics. We then examine the theoretical underpinnings of laddering, our research method, and explicate our specific research activities. Finally, we present our research findings and discuss the implications for both managers and researchers.

## 2. Sales manager literature review

In reviewing the sales literature, four studies were found that addressed sales manager characteristics directly—three early works published in academically related journals and one more recent practitioner-oriented study. The three academic studies, Spencer [6], Dubinsky and Ingram [4] and Guest and Meric [5], examined perceived importance of characteristics for sales manager selection, not the attributes of an effective sales manager. It is not unusual for sales organizations to promote their top salespeople to the position of sales manager. Yet, only one study suggests that the traits of effective salespeople are similar to the traits of effective sales managers [8]. Indeed, some evidence suggests that sales effectiveness does not necessarily translate into sales management effectiveness [6,9]. Research relating the characteristics managers consider for promotion and the traits found in effective sales managers was not found.

The most recent study addressing characteristics of sales “leaders” was commissioned by *Sales and Marketing Management* and surveyed a cross-section of existing sales managers “identified by their companies as the best” (Ref. [8], p. 40). The seven key leadership traits uncovered through personality assessments and highlighted in this

study included being assertive, ego-driven, a risk-taker, innovative, urgent, empathetic and possessing ego-strength. Underlying this study is a focus on “sales leadership” rather than “sales management,” with sales leaders generally described as being more visionary, motivating and purposeful than sales managers who make sure the “sales process works” [8].

The three academic studies investigating the characteristics of sales managers are over a decade old and, given the changing environment of personal selling and sales management, need to be revisited to offer substantive guidance for today’s sales force [8]. Further study of these issues has implications for sales manager selection, career development and manager and sales person job performance in a marketplace that is increasingly competitive [2].

## 3. Research method and procedure

This research seeks to develop a rich understanding of the attributes of effective sales managers and uncover the constructs driving the importance of these attributes. Consequently, we selected the value laddering technique as the most appropriate for conducting this type research [10]. The goal of value laddering is to uncover root needs and values (i.e., the desired end-states) important to respondents, probing beyond a superficial discussion of attributes or concrete properties of the topic under investigation. In the laddering interview, the researcher begins with an attribute recognized by the respondent and asks, in a progressive fashion, what the consequences of each attribute are and what needs or values each consequence serves. This format uses a series of probing questions, typified by “Why is that important to you?” Value-laddering methodology allows researchers to develop means–end chains, also referred to as ladders, which delve far beyond the obvious characteristics or traits. Such ladders allow researchers to develop linkages among the attributes of the research topic, the consequences resulting from one possessing those attributes and ultimately, the root values driving the presence of those attributes [10]. These means–end chains are constructed one-on-one with individual respondents and then analyzed and aggregated across subjects [10,11].

The three basic levels of research interest considered in means–end theory that are integral to the laddering method include the following.

(1) Attributes, activities or cues (A)—stimuli or characteristics of products, selling situations, or individuals. Attributes important to sales researchers might include open communication, adaptiveness, trustworthiness, listening and/or specific sales activities undertaken to identify and satisfy customer wants/needs.

(2) Consequences (C)—reasons why the attribute or activity is important to the individual, the personal interpretation or meaning given to the specific attribute. Consequences important in sales might include shared

goals, appropriate responses to customers' unique needs or data sharing.

(3) Values or goals(V)—end-states that drive individuals. In a sales context, typical values might include strong customer relationships, increased sales volume or loyal customers.

Thus, in a sales environment, means–end analysis focuses attention on the linkages between: (1) activities in which members of the sales organization engage or the attributes of salespeople/sales managers, (2) the consequences for the individual who engages in certain activities or possesses certain attributes, and ultimately, (3) the personal values or goals the consequences reinforce. This perspective suggests that people seek to achieve end-states and that they view specific attributes or activities as important so long as desired goals, or end-states, are achieved [12,13].

Previous laddering research has shown that when data are aggregated, an attribute may be linked to multiple consequences and several consequences may be salient before respondents discuss the highest level of abstraction, values [14,15]. Thus, the results will not always depict clean  $A \rightarrow C \rightarrow V$  ladders. Indeed, linkages, such as  $A \rightarrow C \rightarrow C \rightarrow C \rightarrow V$ , can be expected. Although these sorts of chains add to the “messiness” of presenting findings, this complexity contributes to the rich exploration of relationships among constructs.

### 3.1. Sample and data collection

Data were collected in the Midwest and the South from 51 sales professionals through a focused in-depth interview process, the primary method of data collection used in value laddering research [10]. Subjects were interviewed either face-to-face or via telephone, depending on their work schedules and location. Interviews lasted from 30 to 75 min and were audiotaped for later verbatim transcription used in data analysis. Most respondents were male (70%) and possessed a college degree (83%). Thirty-six percent of respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39, followed by 20 and 29 (25%), 40 and 49 (19%) and 50 and 59 (11%). These sales professionals represented a wide range of industries, including pharmaceuticals, telecommunications/computer equipment, food services, insurance/investments, office equipment and supplies, electrical suppliers, wholesaling, television/advertising, business services, medical equipment and supplies, OEM parts and heavy equipment.

The starting point for the laddering interview was to have the respondent determine personally relevant distinctions among effective and ineffective sales managers. The interviewer asked the respondent to list five to eight characteristics or attributes of an effective sales manager within his/her own experiences in sales. As a means to determine where to begin the laddering process, the respondent was then asked to rank the attributes in order of importance [10]. Using the attribute ranked as most important, the interviewer began the laddering process by asking “why is the [number one attribute] import-

ant?” Depending on the respondent's answer, the interviewer would probe further with questions such as “What effect does that have?” and “How does that affect the sales force?” As needed by the given interview dynamics, the interviewer might ask a probing question in a reverse format. For example, when a respondent seemed unable to articulate the reasons why an attribute was important, the interviewer might ask “what might be the effect if a sales manager did not possess [a specific attribute]?”

On occasion, the respondent would note several effects that emanate from a single attribute. The interviewer noted these effects and each was used as a basis for laddering [16]. This process continued until the respondent had addressed each of the attributes chosen. Using this process, a total of 308 ladders were collected from the interviews.

### 3.2. Analysis

Following Gengler and Reynolds [14], four basic tasks were undertaken to analyze the data resulting from the laddering process. Initially, the raw conversational data were broken down into meaningful “chunks.” The effect of this task was to remove any extraneous conversation to avoid confounding the data analysis process. For example, a sales manager discussing the importance of interpersonal skills to sales management stated “And at times you've got to be able to listen, because people need to be upbeat to be salespeople.” This statement was broken down into two meaningful chunks: (1) you have got to listen, and (2) salespeople need to be upbeat. The remaining chunks of data were comprised of direct, detailed quotes classified as attributes of an effective sales manager, consequences resulting from those attributes, or values driving the importance of those attributes [10,14].

Once the meaningful chunks were identified, the individual responses were coded. Our initial codes were developed from the research discussed in our literature review with refinements made as necessary. A manageable group of 59 codes were identified and assigned to the basic chunks of meaning by two judges working independently of one another [14]. A third judge then reviewed the coding of the first two judges, serving as a tiebreaker when necessary. Computer-assisted content analysis, supported by the software LADDERMAP [17], was used to help reduce coding inconsistencies [18].

With the coding process completed, the next step in the data analysis process involved the aggregation of individual ladders across subjects. The result of this aggregation was an implications matrix. Such a matrix bridges the gap between the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the laddering technique by displaying the number of times each code leads to another code [10,19]. The implications matrix reveals both direct and indirect relationships, which facilitates the identification of linkages in the ladder across respondents [10].

The implications matrix was then used to draw a hierarchical value map (HVM) as a means to illustrate the

relationships among the constructs [19]. Gengler and Reynolds [14] suggest that to construct a meaningful, interpretable HVM, data reduction often is necessary. Furthermore, these researchers recommend that a high percentage, at least 70%, of the relationships among the variables identified by the respondents be included in the HVM. The map developed by our analysis contains 81% of the associations among the attributes, consequences and values expressed by our respondents.

**4. Results and discussion**

The results are displayed in a HVM map in Fig. 1. Tables 1 and 2 provide a listing of the attributes, values and consequences, respectively, including a description of each variable and characteristic quotations.

As shown in the HVM, each of the attributes identified as illustrative of effective sales managers is richly linked to one

or more consequences that, in turn, impact desired end-states or values. The identification of these attributes, consequences and values of effective sales management builds on our existing knowledge of desirable characteristics of sales managers. Yet, a greater contribution lies in understanding the linkages among these variables.

As we examine the HVM and the stronger linkages discussed by our respondents, three major roles for sales managers emerge: the sales manager as communicator, motivator and coach. Each of these roles will be discussed more fully with the major links among the connecting attributes, consequences and values highlighted.

*4.1. The sales manager as communicator*

The respondents in our study felt strongly about the role of communication in effective sales management. *Communication skills* is the most frequently discussed attribute by respondents and *supportive communication* was one of the

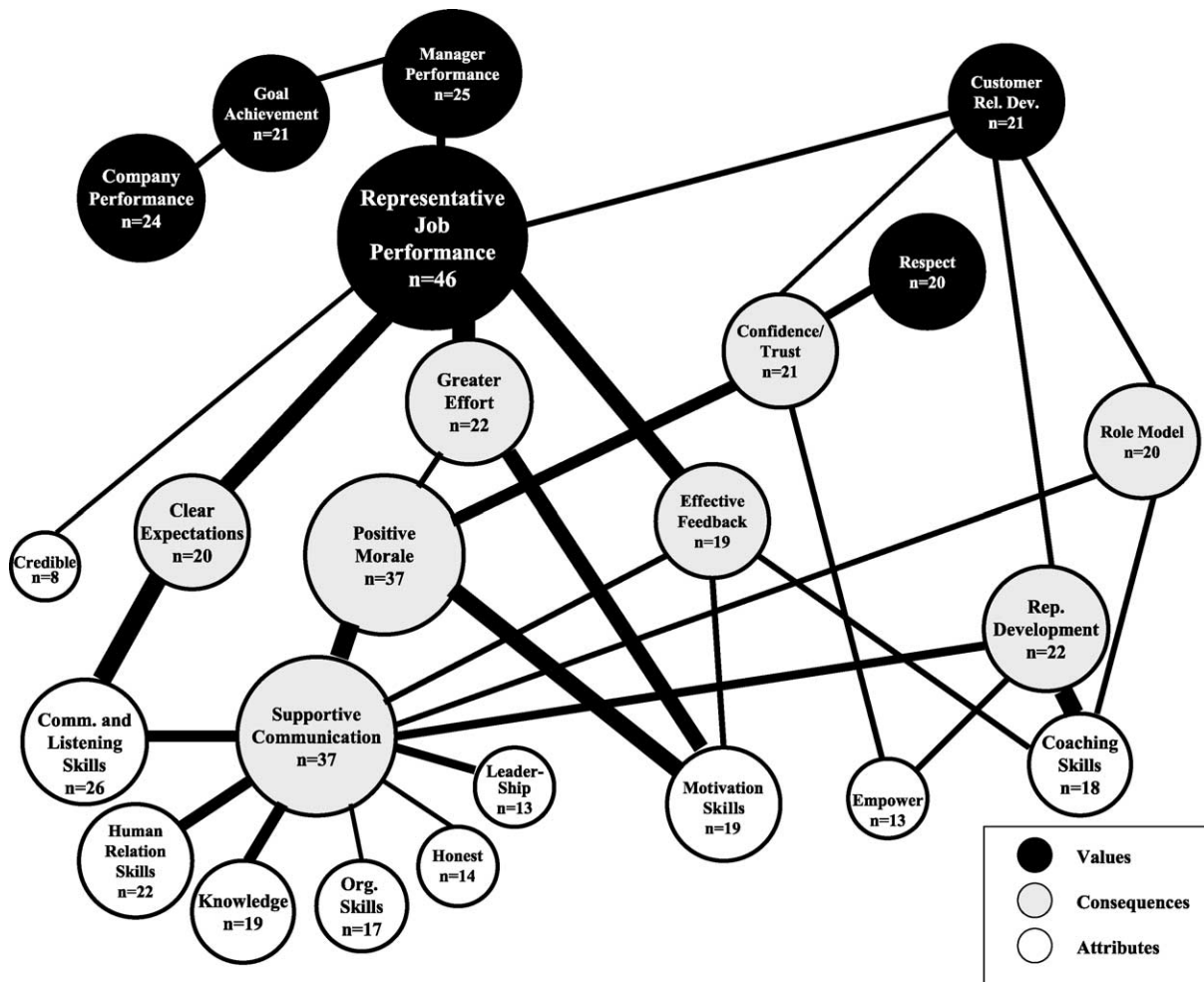


Fig. 1. Hierarchical value map (HVM) of the attributes, consequences and values associated with sales manager effectiveness. Please note that the thickness of the lines between variables indicates strength of the relationship. Additionally, the diameter of the circles reflects the relative frequency with which respondents mentioned the variable [19].

Table 1  
Attributes possessed by effective sales managers

Attribute	Description of attribute	Characteristic comments
Communication/ listening skills	Sales manager possesses the skills and is willing to communicate and listen effectively.	“listened whenever there was an issue” “convey to whomever you’re speaking exactly what’s most important”
Human relations skills	Sales manager possesses the ability to work with people effectively and develop personal rapport with members of the sales force.	“the most important job of a manager is to be able to relate well with that sales team” “getting along with the sales force”
Possession of knowledge	Sales manager possesses knowledge about the industry, the product and business in general.	“if you don’t have a good understanding of how the industry works then you really don’t know how to answer the question” “important to have a real solid business mind or business acumen”
Motivational skills	Sales manager understands what motivates salespeople and is oriented toward recognizing and rewarding good performance.	“I think you have to keep them excited and upbeat and positive” “important for the sales force to be rewarded or recognized and noticed for the work they’re doing”
Coaching skills	The sales manager serves as a mentor to representatives, helping them improve selling skills.	“you need to constantly make sure those individuals are improving their skills” “to coach them along, go out on sales calls with them”
Organization/time management skills	Sales manager possesses the ability to organize and manage his or her own work and time.	“understanding organization, understanding delegation, time management” “efficient in trying to organize”
Honest/ethical tendencies	Sales manager is truthful and straightforward with reps, and is considered ethical by reps.	“as a manager you have to be honest with the people that work for you” “they have to know that whatever they ask you to do or they tell you in confidence you will do or it will stay in confidence”
Leadership skills	Sales manager possesses the skills to encourage and inspire reps.	“you need to lead so your associates can follow you” “sales associates need to be able to look to a sales manager as a leader”
Willingness to empower	Sales manager allows reps to take responsibility and action; does not micro manage.	“enable others to go ahead and do it” “empower the employees to accomplish their goals however they choose”
Credibility	Sales manager is perceived to be credible.	“a sales manager has to be much more credible to his people for them to believe” “the manager is able to instill in his sales reps respectability about himself”

Attributes are listed in descending order, based on frequency of mention by respondents.

most frequently mentioned consequences. Moreover, 6 of the 10 attributes identified in this study were seen as leading to supportive communication, including *communication skills*, *human relation skills*, *possession of knowledge*, *organization/time management skills*, *honest/ethical tendencies* and *leadership skills*. The identification of each of these six attributes as contributing to a sales manager’s supportive communication represents a key finding, suggesting that many of the skills associated with effective sales management are associated with supporting the sales representative. In addition, as one can see from the figure, *supportive communication* was linked with four other consequences: *positive morale*, *sales representative development*, *effective feedback* and *role model*. Of these, *positive morale* was by far the most frequently mentioned by our respondents.

#### 4.1.1. Positive morale

The link between *supportive communication* and *positive morale* is an interesting one. Our results suggest that sales force morale will be higher, and sales representatives will be more likely to perceive a positive working environment, when the sales manager openly communicates with and supports his or her representatives. This idea is exemplified in a quote from a sales representative in the industrial equipment rental industry, who noted that a lack of supportive

communication from the sales manager could impact the working environment negatively.

If they don’t understand where you’re coming from, if they don’t want to understand you and you don’t want to keep an open line of communication then it just makes for a tense workplace.

By fostering a supportive environment in which sales representatives feel comfortable communicating with their manager, this rep thinks an effective sales manager keeps communication open in two directions and thereby develops a positive work environment and builds sales force morale. Importantly, the strong linkage between *supportive communication* and *positive morale* suggests a number of our respondents clearly echo the sentiments of this sales representative.

*Positive morale* was subsequently linked with *confidence/trust*, thus, indicating that when positive morale exists among the sales force, sales representatives trust the sales manager and are more confident. In turn, *confidence/trust* was linked with two values, *customer relationship development/retention* and *respect*. The linkages from *positive morale*→*confidence/trust*→*customer relationship development/retention* seem to highlight sales management as a support agent. Specifically, if sales managers can create a

Table 2  
Consequences and values: key drivers of attribute importance

Consequence	Description of consequence	Characteristic comments
Supportive communication	Reps feel that they can communicate openly with sales manager and receive support from that manager when needed.	“can talk openly and freely” “they feel they are heard and supported”
Positive morale	Reps perceive the workplace as a positive environment; sales force morale is high.	“really working to have a better environment” “excited and upbeat and positive”
Greater effort Rep development	Sales reps are willing to work harder Reps selling skills are developed and improved.	“they’re going to work hard for that person” “help them develop their skills” “I’m here to get you prepared”
Confidence/trust	Sales manager instills confidence in and develops trust with the members of the sales force.	“go out in front of customers in a confident fashion”
Role model	Sales manager is seen as an example or model that sales reps can follow.	“setting an example for everyone else” “model good sales technique”
Clear expectations	Sales reps clearly understand their roles and what is expected of them.	“define clearly what their expectations are” “people have a clear understanding of what is expected”
Effective feedback	Sales manager provides feedback and is effective in getting his or her point across to representatives.	“giving them immediate feedback” “you’ve got to sit down with them and tell them that”
Value	Description of value	Characteristic comments
Representative job performance	Sales representative achieves success in sales for company.	“More productive and aggressive sales force”
Manager job performance	Sales manager fulfills job requirements.	“if the team isn’t performing the coach is looked to”
Company performance	Company is successful.	“ultimate performance of the company” “help the company be more profitable” “attain goals you’re trying to achieve”
Goal achievement	Set goals are attained.	“tend to have longer-term relationships”
Customer relationship development	Customer relationships are developed and maintained.	“develop strong relationships that lasts”
Respect	Sales manager achieves the respect of the sales force.	“earning the respect of those that you manage”

Consequences and values are listed in descending order, based on frequency of mention by respondents.

positive work environment and develop sales force morale through their efforts as a communicator, then sales representatives will have greater trust in the sales manager, more confidence in their own abilities as a sales representative, and be more capable of developing lasting relationships with customers. A young male sales representative in the office products industry specifically noted how his trust in his sales manager enhanced his ability to develop relationships with customers.

I guess it enables me to give my customers special consideration because there’s a certain way that you’re supposed to do things that corporate wants you to do. And sometimes I want to be able to go away from that so that I can do some special things so that my customers really feel like I’m taking care of them. And I can go to my manager and ask him if he thinks it will be all right if I do this. Since I trust him I know that he’s going to give me what’s in my best interest and the best interests of my customers.

In this case, it appears that a trusting relationship with his sales manager gives this sales representative the freedom and confidence to approach his manager with ideas that could be used to develop and solidify customer relationships.

The linkage *confidence/trust*→*respect* highlights a somewhat different aspect of sales management. Interestingly, *respect* was the only desired end-state identified by

our respondents that was not directly performance-related. Indeed, the relationship *confidence/trust*→*respect* suggests that earning the respect of the sales force is important in and of itself. In particular, sales managers seemed concerned about their own reputations. This idea is exemplified in a quote from a female sales manager who, when asked what would happen if the sales manager did not have the trust of the sales force, indicated the sales manager’s reputation would be damaged.

They probably would talk about you or bad mouth you. They’d probably talk about you to other sales reps and probably turn other people off you as well.

This quote highlights this sales manager’s concern with negative word-of-mouth communication that could result in a loss of respect from the sales force. In positive terms, the relationship between *confidence/trust* and *respect* indicates that a sales manager who is trusted by the sales force and has worked to establish confidence in sales representatives is more likely to earn the respect of that sales force.

#### 4.1.2. Clear expectations

As part of our discussion of the sales manager as a communicator, it is worth noting that a sales manager’s skill in communication was strongly linked to establishing *clear expectations*. Certainly, the importance of a manager’s

communication and listening skills to a sales representative's understanding of roles and expectations seems obvious. Moreover, our results suggest that clear expectations can add structure to the hectic daily life of a sales representative. As indicated by a female sales representative, clear expectations can provide a needed focus on ultimate goals for salespeople operating in a chaotic environment.

I think it's real important for the sales manager to communicate what he or she expects of the individual sales person. And I guess be able to define, clearly, what their expectations are. What their ultimate goals are. As sales people you get caught up in the day-to-day, real minute activity. That's important but I think you can get lost in that and then you may just find yourself working on sort of a general to-do list as opposed to focusing those tasks and what your activities are around what the overall goal is.

Our results also provide evidence that clearly stated expectations and roles can enhance the job performance of the sales representative. Thus, by understanding what is expected of them, sales representatives are in a better position to meet or exceed those expectations for performance. This understanding is directly related to the communication skills of an effective sales manager.

#### 4.2. The sales manager as motivator

The second theme to emerge from the data is the sales manager as a motivator. *Motivational skills* are linked strongly with two consequences, *greater effort* and *positive morale*.

##### 4.2.1. Greater effort

Respondents in our study highlighted the linkage between a manager's ability to motivate and reward and a representative's willingness to work harder (*greater effort*). Moreover, the subsequent linkage, *greater effort* → *sales representative job performance*, was the most frequently mentioned by respondents, as indicated by the width of the line joining the two variables. One computer industry sales representative noted that rewards and recognition impact performance by giving salespeople a reason to work harder.

I think it's important for the sales force to be rewarded or to be recognized and noticed for the work they are doing. . . It constantly gives them something to strive for; knowing that their efforts are going to be recognized and that other people are noticing them. I mean, we need a goal to aim for and without those goals then we have nothing to push for. And if we don't have any reason to go out and actually sell then we just won't.

As reflected in this quote, a manager's ability to motivate the sales force through encouragement, rewards and recognition translates into a willingness of that representative to work harder. That willingness to work harder can, in turn, result in more effective sales representative performance.

##### 4.2.2. Positive morale

Respondents also discussed *motivational skills* as contributing directly to a positive workplace and high salesperson morale. Indeed, this linkage was quite strong, as reflected by the width of the line in the HVM. A male sales representative provided a clear example of how his manager's ability to motivate had a positive impact on his perception of his work environment.

I think that part of the reason why I am in this job is because my sales manager was able to instill in me that this is the best company in this industry. That if I do certain things right that there are going to be some big-time benefits. And that this is a great place to work and this is a great city to work in. So. . . there was a lot of getting pumped-up. Just kind of a feeling that this is a great place to work.

This quote suggests that encouraging words from the sales manager regarding the company and the job can play a role in developing the sales representative's perception about the working environment of that company.

It seems likely that *positive morale* could affect a sales representative's job performance. Interestingly, however, our results reveal a linkage between *positive morale* and *greater effort*, thereby suggesting an indirect linkage to job performance. This finding is intuitively appealing; if sales representatives find the workplace to be positive, and morale is high, one would expect those representatives to put forth a greater effort, thereby impacting their job performance. Yet, the strength of this linkage, as indicated by the width of the connection, suggests this view is perhaps not widely recognized by the respondents in our study. Nevertheless, a few respondents made clear reference to this symbiotic relationship between *positive morale* and *greater effort*. As succinctly stated by a male sales manager in the heavy equipment industry, "In our business they usually produce more if they're happier."

#### 4.3. The sales manager as coach

The final dominant theme to emerge from our data was the role of sales manager as coach. The identification of this attribute is interesting, particularly because coaching skills have not received much attention in the academic literature [20]. Moreover, the respondents in our study clearly identified a distinction between the ability to motivate and coaching. Whereas our respondents defined motivational skills as the sales manager's ability to encourage, reward and recognize, they defined coaching skills as helping sales representatives develop sales skills through mentoring and one-on-one interaction.

Coaching skills were linked with several consequences, including *sales representative development*, *effective feedback* and *role model*. The stronger of these linkages are worthy of further discussion—*sales representative development* and *effective feedback*.

#### 4.4. Sales representative development

The results reveal a strong link between manager *coaching skills* and *sales representative development*, i.e., the development and improvement of sales representative selling skills. This finding is logical; one would expect the ability of the sales manager to mentor and coach sales representatives on their selling skills to contribute to the actual improvement of the representatives' selling skills. A female sales manager, when asked why she had identified coaching as important to effective sales management, noted that sales managers need to develop representatives by going along with them on sales calls as a means to provide ideas and suggestions for improvement.

I just look at myself with my general manager. I go to him for different things or he'll come to me to try to help me out on things and I think it's important, as they need help, that we're available to help them. To coach them along, go out on sales calls with them. Perhaps give them ideas or suggestions of things they could try next time that might work better. Just try to help develop them.

The above quote illustrates that with respect to coaching, effective sales management involves assisting sales representatives in skill development through on-the-job interaction. Subsequently, our results suggest *sales representative development* is linked with *customer relationship development/retention*. This linkage was not mentioned as frequently as some other linkages, particularly those related to *sales representative job performance*. Nevertheless, a sales representative whose skills have been developed and improved should be better equipped to develop lasting relationships with customers. One male sales representative noted the benefit of sales managers who provide substantive training to sales people:

If they could provide value to the sales cycle itself in terms of the type of knowledge that would be helpful and make me feel more comfortable, as a customer.

As this representative puts himself in the role of customer, he sees the linkage between a sales representative who is knowledgeable, and a representative who provides value to the customer, thereby contributing to customer relationship development.

##### 4.4.1. Effective feedback

The ability of the sales manager to coach sales representatives was also linked with *effective feedback*. This linkage was not nearly as strong as the linkage to *sales representative development*. Moreover, a manager's ability to coach was not the only variable associated with this consequence; *supportive communication* and *motivational skills* were also identified. Nevertheless, *effective feedback* warrants further scrutiny because of its strong linkage to *sales representative job performance*.

To improve and develop the selling skills of sales people, some of our respondents noted that the sales manager must provide feedback to those salespeople. A male sales manager in the automobile rental industry discussed how *coaching* and *effective feedback* work together:

I'm very much into teaching and preparing my people. This is my philosophy, it's very simple. You go in and you tell them what you're going to do, show them what to do, you let them do it and then you're going to follow-up and make sure they did it.

As the sales manager provides guidance and teaches representatives skills, feedback on how the representative performed those skills or tasks is important to complete the coaching process.

A greater number of respondents recognized the importance of the *effective feedback*→*sales representative job performance* linkage. The strong linkage between these two variables suggests that when a sales manager can effectively provide feedback to the sales person, that sales person can use that feedback to improve his or her job performance. A female sales representative in the office products industry saw the sales management role as one of challenger, keeping sales people on track to improve performance by providing an indication of how they are doing.

You need to be constantly making sure that those individuals are improving on their skills. . . And people don't always do those things on their own. That individual would need to continually keep people challenging themselves. Keeping them on track and also letting them know where they stand. . . They're going to be more apt to respond and want to do more. . . They're just going to be more effective in their job.

Taken together, these quotes highlight effective feedback as an important link between coaching skills and representative job performance. The findings argue that to improve job performance, managers should not only coach representatives on skills, but also subsequently provide feedback on their performance of those skills.

## 5. Discussion

In this study, we sought to develop a deeper understanding of the attributes that contribute to the effectiveness of sales managers and explore the impact those characteristics have upon the sales force. Through value-laddering in-depth interviews, our respondents identified, in an unaided fashion, key attributes of effective sales managers and discussed resultant consequences and values that enrich our knowledge of sales managers and their role in the sales force. Although previous research has, through aided lists in a survey format, asked sales and human resource personnel to assess the value of a variety of characteristics in determining sales manager selection, ours



is the first study to examine sales manager effectiveness in job performance.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the identification of not only the attributes of effective sales management, but also the consequences derived from those attributes and the values driving the importance of those attributes. By uncovering the linkages among these attributes, consequences and values, the results of this study build on and extend previous research findings. For example, although the importance of trust in the manager has been recognized [21], the relationship between positive morale and a trusting relationship has not been explored by researchers. The identification of previously unrecognized variables and relationships represents a significant contribution to the sales management literature.

### 5.1. Implications for future research

Value laddering allows respondents to identify not only personally meaningful characteristics, but also the underlying consequences and end-states that respondents view as relevant and desirable. As marketing researchers develop tools to explore beyond superficial listings of traits or attributes, the value laddering approach holds great promise in providing a deeper theoretical understanding of a variety of issues. Specifically in the present study, we can start to understand better the role of sales managers in an organization. Indeed, this research offers a model of sales manager effectiveness and potentially of sales manager performance that can be tested in future research.

Further research is needed to confirm and expand the results of our study. Some areas of potential benefit are: (1) a comparison of sales manager and salespeople perspectives on the attributes, consequences and values seen as important in effective sales managers; (2) a breakdown of the effectiveness of sales managers at hierarchical levels within an organization; (3) exploration of the potential differences in sales manager effectiveness in various selling situations or industries; and (4) a broader, cross-sectional study to examine further the relationships we uncovered.

### 5.2. Managerial implications

In comparing and contrasting the three themes emerging from the laddering analysis, one underlying insight becomes apparent: respondents in our study viewed effective sales management as an indirect support mechanism for sales representatives. A manager who is a supportive communicator can create a positive work environment that results in confident, trusting representatives. A manager with strong motivational skills adds to that positive work environment and inspires in the representatives a willingness to put forth greater effort. A manager with good coaching skills can assist the representative through the development of that representative's skill set and through effective feedback. Ultimately, key outcomes, such as the sales representative's

job performance and ability to develop lasting customer relationships, can be impacted by the skills of an effective sales manager.

Previous research suggests that effective sales people are not necessarily effective sales managers [6,9]. Although several of the attributes of effective sales managers identified in this study are similar to the attributes of successful sales people (e.g., *communication/listening skills*), differences also exist. In particular, our results argue that effective motivational and coaching skills play a critical role in effective sales management. Salespeople making the move to sales management may not have developed these skills. Practitioners should take steps to ensure that potential and/or existing sales managers understand the importance of encouragement, rewards and recognition and are able to put these skills into practice. Likewise, the need to mentor and coach sales representatives should be made salient and subsequently implemented.

## 6. Conclusions

As the link between upper management and the sales force, the sales manager is in a position to influence sales force and organizational performance. Therefore, understanding sales manager effectiveness is critical especially as the business environment is becoming more dynamic and the role of the sales force is uncertain. Using the value laddering methodology, we have developed a rich understanding of the attributes of effective sales managers and the impact of those attributes on the sales force. By identifying communicator, motivator and coach as key sales management roles, we have built on and extended existing sales management research.

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