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Does Supervisory Coaching Behaviour Reduce Salespeople's Lies?

Anne Mathieu, Université de Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada
Claudio Pousa, Université de Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada

Email: Claudio.Pousa@USherbrooke.ca

Abstract

Lying is pervading organizations and has a high economic and social toll. Lying among salespeople can be particularly dangerous, as they are at the boundaries of the organization and can affect many organizational outcomes. Traditionally, control systems have been used to reduce information asymmetry and the possibility of opportunistic behaviour (such as lying), and lately it was suggested that managers' attitudes and role modeling could further reduce them. Building on the social exchange framework, we analyse relational exchanges between managers and subordinates, and we propose that managerial coaching can reduce subordinates' lies. We present empirical evidence supporting our hypothesis and discuss significant theoretical and managerial implications.

Key words: Sales coaching, Lying, Information Asymmetry, Social Exchange Theory

Introduction

Recent surveys conducted on behalf of one leading professional magazine showed that the extent of lying in selling organizations is huge: almost 50% of sales representatives have lied to their customers and almost 60% cheat their expense reports every month (Strout, 2001, 2002). Organizational costs due to lying and other deviant behaviours have been increasing as a growing number of employees become engaged in some type of deviance (Robinson and Bennett, 1995).

Research into this type of misbehaviour has increased in the last years. Scholars found that job pressures, the search for self-benefits and coping with conflicting roles positively affect the incidence of lying (Grover, 1993; Grover and Hui, 1994, 2005); that lying and other deceptive behaviours could be reduced due to the presence of outcome and behaviour-based control systems (Agarwal and Ramaswami, 1993; Jaworski and McInnis, 1989). In addition, perceptions of trust and fairness (Ramaswami, Srinivasan and Gorton, 1997) and sales managers' role modeling (Jelinek and Ahearne, 2006b) have all been examined.

One avenue of research that was not explored is managers' behaviour. Managers can show trust-development behaviours, like coaching, and develop high-quality relationships with their subordinates, thus increasing their willingness to reciprocate. Practitioners enthusiastically praised coaching as an antecedent of employee collaboration, commitment, satisfaction and performance (Hargrove, 1995; Richardson, 1996; Whitmore, 1985) but scientific literature "remains largely atheoretical and devoid of empirical research" (Ellinger, Hamlin and Beattie, 2008). Thus, in this paper we intend to answer the following research question: *Does sales manager coaching behaviour reduce salespeople's lies?*

In the following sections we discuss the literature on lying and other deviant behaviours in organizations, and on the use of control systems as a way of reducing these behaviours. Based on Social Exchange Theory, we propose that sales managers' behaviours could complement the effect of control systems and further reduce salespeople's lying behaviour; we present the results of an empirical investigation, and following presentation of these results we propose interesting theoretical and managerial implications.

Lying and other Deceptive Behaviours in Organizations

A huge number of social interactions involve trying to deceive other people (Persaud, 2005) and the business environment is not an exception (Grover and Hui, 2005). Recent surveys show that 45% of sales managers have caught salespeople lying to customers about delivery dates and 47% suspect that they lie on sales calls (Strout, 2002).

Different studies found that lying is considered as one of the most unethical behaviours in the workplace (Abratt and Penman, 2001; Payne, 2008; Shepard and Hartenian, 1991) and that salespeople's lying and deception not only harm the customer and the competing sellers, but also "the social fabric and background of trust, essential for a flourishing society and economy" (Carson, 2001). Research found that salespeople vary in their willingness to lie to different stakeholders, and that the probability of lying to a customer or a channel partner is higher than lying to their own company (Ross and Robertson, 2000). Accordingly, it can not be ruled out that salespeople also lie to their own managers; in fact, recent studies published in one of the leading sales and marketing practitioner's magazines indicated that this behaviour has extended from lying to customers to lying on expenses reports and to the organization (Strout, 2001).

The research has explored different theoretical perspectives in order to understand lying antecedents. For example, scholars found that people holding conflicting roles will reduce the conflict by fulfilling the expectations of one role and lying about having fulfilled the others (Grover, 1993; Grover and Hui, 1994). Scholars using self-interest theories found that people will lie when doing so benefits them (Grover and Hui, 1994, 2005). Further, agency theory posits that agents (salespeople) will lie to their principals (managers) if the former have more information than the later (thus, they have the opportunity to lie) and lying benefits them by improving their performance evaluation, or avoiding punishments and reprimands (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen and Mecklin, 1976; John, 1984).

Information asymmetry is a critical issue in these research areas. Information asymmetry refers to the fact that one party can have more information than the other (Ramaswami et al, 1997). For example, a significant number of salespeople usually work far from their headquarters in physical isolation from other employees (Ingram, LaForge, Locander, MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2005), thus they have more information than their managers regarding their real behaviour in the field. If this information is unfavourable to the employee, it might never be disclosed, particularly if it can affect the employee's rewards (Jaworski, 1988).

Empirical research has identified information asymmetry as a precursor of dysfunctional behaviours (Jaworski, 1988; John, 1984; Ramaswami et al, 1997), thus scholars have focused on ways to reduce asymmetry and one of the most studied mechanisms for reducing information asymmetry is control systems.

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Control Systems

A control system is "an organization's set of procedures for monitoring, directing, evaluating and compensating its employees" (Anderson and Oliver, 1987) and it has been characterized as a continuum anchored by two alternative strategies labelled "outcome-based" and "behavioural-based" control systems (Oliver and Anderson, 1994).

Outcome-based control systems use objective measures of performance to determine employees' goal accomplishment and few (or no) attention is given to employees' behaviours directed at reaching the goals; in contrast, behaviour-based control systems monitor employees' behaviours and activities rather than the end results (Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Jaworski, 1988; Oliver and Anderson, 1994; Ramaswami et al, 1997). Salespeople are usually monitored using a mix of outcome- and behaviour-based control systems, depending on environmental, organizational and salesperson characteristics (Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Jaworski, 1988).

When both outcome- and behaviour-based control systems are present, scientific research has found that information asymmetry is reduced (Agarwal and Ramaswami, 1993; Jaworski and MacInnis, 1989). However, it is not eliminated; salespeople might still have additional information that is not revealed to sales managers for different reasons: unwillingness, oversight, because they don't expect other salespeople to reveal all the information, etc. (Ramaswami et al, 1997). Accordingly, as information asymmetry is reduced but not completely eliminated, salespeople could still behave opportunistically and show dysfunctional behaviours, such as lying.

Scholars proposed additional theoretical frameworks, such as social exchange theory, as *complementary* ways to reduce information asymmetry and dysfunctional behaviours. In the next section, we will elaborate on these issues, in particular, on the effect of sales managers' behaviour on information asymmetry and salespeople dysfunctional behaviours.

The Social Exchange framework

Further to studying control systems as a way to reduce information asymmetry, scholars have proposed that managers can "create conditions wherein employees communicate known information voluntarily" (Ramaswami et al, 1997). This perspective proposed that managers should consider the implications of social relationships developed among organizational members and "the importance of the 'social contract' in maintaining efficient exchange in long-run relationships that are vulnerable to opportunism" (John, 1984, p. 287); in such contexts, employees might adopt a long-term perspective and privilege their desire to maintain balanced relationships with their managers (John, 1984; Ramaswami et al, 1997).

The social exchange framework is a useful one to understand these exchanges. Social exchange theory proposes that people might go beyond the simple economic transactional exchange and engage in a process of social exchange; through this process, people obtain the benefits of, and contribute to, social interaction, seeking to increase the outcomes that they positively value and decrease those that they negatively value (Molm, 2006). Contemporary developments in social exchange theory have studied the development of relational characteristics that evolve over time as actors repeatedly engage in exchanges with one another; these reciprocal exchanges produce higher levels of trust, commitment and affective ties than mere transactional exchanges (Molm, 2006).

Early research by John (1984) found that individuals might not always show deviant behaviour, even if conditions allow it; when people attribute their behaviour to rewards and coercion (transactional exchanges) more opportunistic behaviour is observed; conversely, when a relational exchange is proposed, they will reciprocate signals of trust and fairness from a valued superior and increase their positive attitudes (John, 1984; Rawaswami et al, 1997). Furthermore, scholars using Social Exchange-based theories (such as Equity Theory, for example) found that employees' perceptions of fairness and justice reduce information asymmetry (Ramaswami et al, 1997) and deviant behaviour (Jelinek and Ahearne, 2006a, 2006b).

Recent research found some support for the impact of management role modeling in reduced organizational deviance; Jelinek and Ahearne (2006b) found that "the tone at the top, or what we call management role modeling" can reduce different types of deviance; guided by the behaviour that they see at the top of the organization, employees learn what is expected from them and what behaviours are accepted; as the organization demonstrates a willingness to punish offenders, employees will increase their trust and commitment, and will align their behaviours accordingly, thus reducing deviant behaviour.

Scholars have made a call to pursue this line of research and find out if improved salespersons-sales managers' communication and empowering manager behaviour could further reduce salespersons' deviance (Jelinek and Ahearne, 2006b). Following this suggestion, we decided to explore if sales managers' coaching behaviour has an impact on a particular type of deviance: lying.

Sales managers coaching behaviour

Recent research proposed that organizations are increasingly embracing "a new management culture based on inclusion, involvement and participation, rather than on the traditional command, control and compliance paradigm" (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2006). One cornerstone of this new management paradigm is coaching (Ellinger, Ellinger and Keller, 2003; Evered and Selman, 1989; Orth, Wilkinson and Benfari, 1987).

Coaching has been largely associated with a one-to-one process of helping others to improve, to grow and to get to a higher level of performance, by providing focused feedback, encouragement and raising awareness (Corcoran et al, 1995; Hargrove 1995; Orth et al, 1987; Richardson 1996; Whitmore 1985). Coaching enables and empowers people, and it opens new opportunities for learning through which improved performance is attained (Ellinger and Bostrom 1999; Ellinger et al, 2003; Evered and Selman 1989).

For a number of years, coaching skills have been identified by sales managers and sales representatives as one of the most important attributes that effective sales managers must have because it could impact sales representatives' development, sales representatives' job performance and customer relationships development (Deeter-Schmelz, Goebel and Kennedy, 2008; Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy and Goebel, 2002). Accordingly, scholars proposed that coaching should be used by sales managers as a primary development tool focused on the individual development of salespersons (Ingram, LaForge and Leigh, 2002); they also proposed that managers should spend more time identifying skill deficiencies and coaching subordinates to improve their effectiveness (Ingram et al, 2005).

Scholars have identified that the most effective managerial behaviours are those associated with coaching, as effective managerial coaching behaviour empowers employees and facilitates employee discovery, development and learning (Beattie, 2002; Ellinger, 1997; Ellinger and Bostrom, 1999); conversely, being directive, authoritarian, dogmatic and controlling are associated with ineffective managerial behaviours (Ellinger et al, 2008; Hamlin et al, 2006). In the same line of thought, Pousa and Mathieu (2010) have recently proposed that managers can either coach or command their subordinates, but as these are opposed behaviours, they can not perform both simultaneously.

Coaching has been characterized as a high-quality Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) relationship (Agarwal, Angst and Magni, 2006), based on mutual trust and managers' role modeling (Rich, 1998). The LMX theory posits that managers will develop two different types of relationships with their subordinates: high- and low-quality relationships. In high-quality relationships superiors rely more on interpersonal exchange rather than formal authority; these types of relationships are characterized by open and honest communication, mutual consideration, trust and respect, and increased obligation between parties (Dansereau, Graen and Haga, 1975; Gerstner and Day, 1997; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995); subordinates reciprocate high-LMX relationships by going beyond required in-role behaviour more frequently and engaging in citizenship behaviours, thus maintaining a balanced social exchange (Ilies Nahrgang and Morgeson, 2007).

By contrast, low-quality exchanges are characterized by low trust, respect and obligation; they involve only obligatory compliance by the subordinates with the formal role requirements; these are typically transactional exchanges, where subordinates strictly adhere to what is required by their job descriptions and only expect formal rewards (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

LMX Theory "has evolved into one of the most interesting and useful approaches for studying hypothesized linkages between leadership process and outcomes" (Gerstner and Day, 1997); additionally, LMX Theory "may be accurately viewed as a theory of dyadic relationships and their subjective consequences, rather than a theory that focuses primarily on leadership " (House and Aditya, 1997).

Social exchange theory is a foundational theory to LMX developments and a highly relevant one to explain LMX exchanges (Liden and Maslyn, 1998; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997); social exchange theorists have identified numerous material and non-material "goods" that could be exchanged, like advice, workflow and friendship (Liden and Maslyn, 1998). Managers will initially start the relational exchange showing initiating behaviours like openness, increased confidence, support and open communication with the subordinates; subordinates would accordingly develop positive attitudes, like trust, respect, commitment and openness, thus reciprocating the high-quality relationship with virtuous behaviours (Ilies, *et al*, 2007; Liden and Maslyn, 1998; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997).

Accordingly, salespersons will develop working relationships of higher quality with superiors adopting coaching behaviours than with those adopting directive behaviours; due to the higher quality of these relationships and the increased trust, consideration, mutual obligation and open communication, sales representatives will tend to reciprocate and tell managers the truth regarding their sales activities.

Thus:

H_1: Subordinates reporting to managers showing coaching (directive) behaviours will have more (less) tendency to tell the truth.

Methodology

We used a single factor design at two levels to test our hypothesis. Volunteer participants from undergraduate classes at a French-Canadian university were recruited for the study and randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (i.e., "directive behaviour" condition vs. "coaching behaviour" condition). The respondents read an instruction that told them to assume they were working as a sales representative for a company and that their supervisor presented the behaviour that was described. Once they have read the paragraph that described their supervisor's profile, they had to report how they would deal with each of four problematic situations by completing a questionnaire that asked them to asses whether they would tell all the truth to their supervisors or not (dependant variable). One manipulation check was also included as part of the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed, the respondents were thanked and dismissed.

Experimental conditions manipulation

The supervisor behaviour was manipulated through a short paragraph. In the directive behaviour condition, the supervisor was depicted as a person who clearly 1) establishes goals and communicates performance expectations and related rewards; 2) tells the salesperson what to do, what actions to undertake and how to perform them; and 3) whenever the salespeople deviates from the suggested actions, the supervisor reprimands him and reminds him what to do.

In the coaching condition, the supervisor was depicted as someone that 1) helps salespeople find new solutions to solve the work problems and challenges; 2) uses a conversational approach in their meetings, helping the salesperson analyze the problem, explore alternatives, and propose actions; and 3) looks for an agreement with the salesperson regarding the actions to be undertaken in order to reach the goals or solve the problems.

Stimuli

We developed four problematic situations between the alleged salespeople and their clients. In the first one, the salesperson skipped visits to a difficult client without informing his supervisor, to finally acknowledge that the client decided to pass most of his business to a competitor. In the second one, the salesperson changes the sales conditions suggested by his supervisor without informing him, because he thinks that it would be a better offer to the client, who finally rejects the deal and closes with a competitor. In the third one, the salesperson skips a training course of a new product line without informing his supervisor, to discover months later that he is incapable of selling those products due to lack of training. In the fourth one, the salesperson stops using the routing that he has established with his supervisor without telling him, to finally find out that his daily routing is too messy and it is difficult to come back from it.

Dependent measure

For each situation, the participants were asked to report whether they would tell all the truth to their supervisors or not. For this purpose, we used McCornack's (1992) instrument and asked participants to rate their agreement with the following proposition: "In this situation I will be completely truthful to my supervisor". Participants rated their agreement using four 7-interval semantic differential scales, with the lower end (1) anchored at unlikely, improbable, impossible and false, and the higher end (7) at likely, probable, possible and true.

Results

Sample: We received 81 useful questionnaires, composed of 50 female (61.7%) and 31 male (38.3%) respondents. The respondents were 22.7 years old on average and had an average of 25.2 months (2.1 years) of professional experience. Thirty-nine people (48.1%) responded to the "directive behaviour" condition questionnaire and 42 (51.9%) to the "coaching behaviour" condition questionnaire.

Manipulation check: Participants were to evaluate their managers' behaviour indicating their agreement or disagreement with a control question measuring a global 7-interval semantic differential scale (directive-coaching). An independent sample T-test showed significant differences in participant's comprehension of both behaviours ($t(322) = -20.64$, $p = .000$) indicating that the manipulation has been effective.

Psychometric properties of the dependent measure: Unidimensionality of the dependent measure was assessed by submitting the four semantic differential items to a principal component analysis. The component extracted accounted for 89.7% of the variance, well beyond the limit of 60% suggested for satisfactory results in the social sciences (Hair, Anderson and Tatham, 1987). The scale is unidimensional and reliable ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Hypothesis test: After unidimensionality was assessed, we averaged the four items into a single index and tested if answers to this single index were different when controlling for manager's behaviour. An independent sample T-test was conducted and showed significant differences in participant's inclination to lie or to manipulate the information communicated to the supervisor when different leadership behaviours were shown (Table 1).

Table 1: Propensity to tell the truth: differences between subjects who were exposed to a coaching supervisor scenario and those who were exposed to a directive supervisor scenario

	Coaching scenario		Directive scenario		t(317)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Propensity to tell the truth	5.61	1.11	4.97	1.58	-4.14**

** $p<0.00$

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Participants reporting to supervisors who showed coaching behaviours showed less inclination to lie or to manipulate information and more inclination to reveal all the truth to them (M=5.61; SD = 1.11) than those reporting to supervisors who showed directive behaviours (M=4.97; SD=1.58) (t (317) =-4.14; p=0.000). Thus, H_1 is supported.

Discussion

We have begun this paper stating that deviant behaviour is pervading organizational life, taking high economic and social tolls; lying, one particular type of deviant behaviour, was extensively found among salespeople regarding their internal and external interactions. Scholars have identified information asymmetry as an antecedent of deviant behaviour and, thus, they have explored different mechanisms to reduce them. Traditionally, behavioural and outcome-based control systems have been used simultaneously to reduce information asymmetry and deviant behaviour; lately, based on social exchange theoretical frameworks, scholars have proposed that employee's perceptions of fairness and justice reduce information asymmetry and deviant behaviour and called to pursue this line of research and find out if improved salesperson-sales manager communication and empowering leadership could further reduce salesperson's deviance. Accordingly, we decided to explore if sales managers'coaching could further reduce a particular salespersons' deviance: lying. Our results suggest interesting theoretical and managerial implications.

Theoretical implications

The primary purpose of the study was to evaluate if managerial coaching behaviour has an impact on salespersons' lies. Results are very promising, because respondents reporting to supervisors who showed coaching behaviours had more inclination to reveal all the truth than those reporting to supervisors who showed directive behaviours.

Our results have several implications for the development of theory of coaching behaviour. Coaching has been largely praised by practitioners as a virtuous managerial behaviour impacting employees' collaboration, commitment, satisfaction and performance. Scholars have recognised this predicament, but research on coaching has been criticized for being predominantly practice-driven and guru-led, remaining largely atheoretical and devoid of empirical research (Ellinger et al, 2008; Grant and Cavanagh, 2004; Hamlin et al, 2006). Our research tries to improve the theoretical understanding of coaching by using institutionalized[1] theoretical frameworks, like LMX Theory and Social Exchange Theory. In this paper we proposed that coaching, as a high-quality LMX relationship, can lay the basis of trust and fairness needed for increased social exchanges in organizational settings; accordingly, individuals working under supervisors showing coaching behaviours will likely tend to reciprocate these behaviours by being more truthful and lying less.

Another theoretical implication relates to the use of managerial coaching to increase the relational exchanges *outside* the organization. Scholars have proposed that organizations are moving away from

[1] Following Miner (2005), we use the term institutionalization to refer to those theories that are widely known, accepted and endorsed by the scientific community.

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short-term transactional exchanges towards a new paradigm based on long-term, trustful relationships between the organization and its customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004); accordingly, relationship marketing has become "one of the dominant mantras in business strategy circles" (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal and Evans, 2006). Salespeople play a central role in the development of long-term buyer-seller relationships (Weitz and Bradford, 1999) through the implementation of specific relational behaviours such as *customer oriented selling* (COS) and *adaptive selling* (AS) (Paparoidamis and Guenzi, 2009). Recent research has found that "supportive supervisors can create cohesive working environments in which salespeople are more likely to collaborate … [while] …in a non-supportive working environment salespeople may behave in a rather egoistic manner, in order to maximize sales figures and avoid negative sanctions from sales managers" (Paparoidamis and Guenzi, 2009); managers developing high-quality LMX relationships between them and salespeople are capable of developing relational behaviours of salespeople (Paparoidamis and Guenzi, 2009). Accordingly, coaching, as a high-quality LMX relationship between sales managers and salespersons, is one specific behaviour that sales managers could adopt to increase relational behaviours and, thus, relational exchanges outside the organization.

Managerial implications

The most important result of this study from a managerial perspective is that coaching can potentially reduce information asymmetry and salespersons' lies. Scientific research in leadership has explored different theories and models, and found that virtuous leadership can impact important organizational outcomes. However, real managers received few clues as to what specific behaviours they should use. Our research suggests that managerial coaching might be one of those behaviours.

Our research also suggests that, even though it is necessary to have control systems, they are not enough and the behaviour showed by sales managers can make a difference. Previous research has shown that subordinates' trust in supervisors is an antecedent of deceptive behaviour (Fulk and Mani 1986; Hubbell 2004) and that coaching by sales managers is a trust-building behaviour (Doyle and Roth, 1992; Rich, 1998). Accordingly, managers can increase the efficiency of the control systems by showing coaching behaviours, which can potentially build high-quality, long-term, trustful relations with their subordinates, improve the communication between them, and reduce lying and other deviant behaviours.

Scholars have also speculated that organizations can invest in formal (e.g. budgeting, management by objectives) and informal (managerial supervision) systems in order to control agent opportunism (Eisenhardt, 1989). As coaching skills can be learned through training (Graham, Wedman and Garvin-Kester, 1993), our study also shows that organizations developing their managers' coaching skills could potentially have an immediate return of their investment in the form of reduced deception and increased trust.

Limitations and further research

Our research has two main limitations, the principal one relates to the use of a convenience sample of undergraduate students. Even though these students were majoring in marketing/business administration and that they had in average more than two years of professional experience (many of them as retail salespersons), the question remains if they are representative of a larger salespeople population regarding the critical behavioural variables. For us, results are promising but the external generalisability is uncertain. Further research should be repeated with more experienced salespeople who are involved in business-to-business contexts.

In order to develop our experiment, we assumed that sales managers would consistently show only one behaviour in all situations, either directing/commanding or coaching. This seems unlikely; some situations might call for quick, directive decisions and commands, while others might be more adapted to coaching and developing. Nevertheless, a commanding manager will mainly use directive behaviour, with coaching interventions being sporadic, while a “coaching” manager will try to use coaching whenever possible, reducing the directive interventions to a minimum. Accordingly, salespeople reporting to them will probably categorize them as “directive” in the first case, and “coach” in the second one. However, further research could consider situational variables to reflect three types of situations: 1) those where both type of managers will show a directive/commanding behaviour; 2) those where both will show a coaching behaviour; and 3) those where each one will show the “preferred” behaviour. It would be interesting to test under which combination of behaviour/situation lies are reduced.

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Prof. Anne Mathieu has a Ph.D. from University of Cincinnati (USA) and is Professor and Chair of the Marketing Department, Faculté d'Administration, Université de Sherbrooke. She specializes in Sales Force Management, Research Methodology and Brand Management.

Claudio Pousa is a doctoral candidate (DBA Program, Université de Sherbrooke, Canada) and has a Masters in Strategic Management (UADE, Argentina) and Electrical Engineer (ITBA, Argentina). He has worked as an independent consultant in sales management, sales force training and sales coaching in Latin America from 1995 to 2006.

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