



# Salesperson Failure

## Sales Management is the Key

Alan J. Dubinsky

*When salespeople fail, the consequences are dramatic—and the impact can be long-term. A key question facing sales managers concerns where the ultimate responsibility for a salesperson's failure lies. Does it reside solely with the salesperson? With the company? With the sales management team? With some combination of this tripartite? Previous research suggests that sales managers are especially prone to attribute failure to the salesperson and much less inclined to assume culpability for it. This article advances the position that salesperson failure, despite the situation, rests ultimately with the sales management team. © 1998 Elsevier Science Inc.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Scenario 1

John has been a sales representative for XYZ Company, a manufacturer of computer hardware, for five years. When he was initially hired, XYZ management

expected great things from him. He'd been a stellar performer in college, had assumed several leadership positions in college social organizations, and as a student had worked part time in a computer hardware and software retailer. Moreover, he is genial, industrious, articulate, and well trained for his position at XYZ. Despite these meritorious characteristics, John has consistently been below his sales and profit quotas during all five years of employment in his highly competitive territory. In fact, his performance has steadily declined over the years. Given this situation, John is dispirited about his chances for improvement and, therefore, has decided to leave XYZ for another job. In essence, John's decamping from XYZ reflects that he has failed in the performance of his job responsibilities.

#### Scenario 2

Mary has been with ABC, Incorporated, for three years. Prior to assuming the ABC sales position, she had been a successful sales representative for five years with a competing firm. Despite the extensive formalized sales training she received at the time she assumed her sales position at ABC, she has a seeming incapacity to identify prospect needs, handle customer objections, and close deals effectively. Additionally, her first-line sales super-

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## “... who essentially is responsible for ... [salesperson] failure?”

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visor spends time weekly in the field making sales calls with her to observe her interaction with customers. Her selling efforts to date have been feckless and have contributed to her being well below her quotas for the three years while at ABC. Given this dire situation, management has decided to terminate her. Essentially, this termination symbolizes that Mary has indeed failed in her job.

The above two situations highlight how a well-trained, seemingly solid sales recruit can go from the apex of management's expectations to the nadir. Both John and Mary had received in-depth sales training and apparently had superb qualifications for the sales position. Yet, both failed in their respective positions. Consequently, John left of his own volition; Mary was terminated.

Salesperson failure, whether it is reflected in a salesperson's self-imposed cessation from the firm, an involuntary termination, or unremitting inadequate performance, has major costs for the employer. Such expenses can include those incurred in recruiting, selecting, and training replacement sales personnel; turnover; salaries and benefits of failed sales personnel; supervisory efforts expended; absenteeism; and lost revenues [1, 2]. Admittedly, failure can be salutary (e.g., have a motivational impact on other employees). By and large, though, it tends to have adverse consequences on the firm.

When a salesperson fails in his or her job, who essentially is responsible for that failure? Is it the salesperson, management, environmental factors (e.g., competition, economic conditions), simple misfortune, or some combination thereof? For instance, in scenario 1, John seemed to “have it all”—a solid pre-sales job track record and considerable training. Intense competition was present in his territory. Therefore, was the competitive environment

the ultimate arbiter in John's decline? Or might there have been a more insidious factor(s) contributing to John's failure and subsequent departure from XYZ Company?

Alternatively, in scenario 2, Mary had industry experience, was seemingly well trained, and was assisted on sales calls by her sales manager. Yet, she was inept in several key stages of the personal selling process, thus leading to her failure. Given that ABC, Incorporated, had really tried to support her in the performance of her job (with training, sales management coaching, etc.), Mary's failure apparently rested with her. Or did it? Might there not have been some other factor or set of factors militating against Mary's success?

The purpose of this article is to advance the position that the ultimate cause of salesperson failure (defined here as a salesperson's self-imposed cessation from the firm, an involuntary termination, or continuously inadequate performance) resides with management. A corollary of this argument is that essentially there is no situation where the salesperson is the final party accountable for his or her failure. Although this credo may contradict conventional sales management wisdom or orthodoxy, offend sales managers' sensibilities, or result in sales practitioners' taking umbrage with this supposition, evidence will be offered to support this contention. Prior to doing so, however, an overview of extant literature examining potential causes for salesperson failure is offered.

### **CAUSES OF SALESPERSON FAILURE: A LOOK AT THE LITERATURE**

Using different research perspectives, investigators have explored what contributes to salesperson failure. The overwhelming conclusion tends to be that sales managers are unlikely to assign culpability to themselves but especially prone to attribute failure to salespeople. When examining failure, sales researchers typically have considered the issue using attribution theory or directly querying sales managers about causes of salesperson failure.

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### **Salesperson Failure vis-à-vis Attribution Theory**

Prior research in sales management (which will be subsequently noted) generally has found that sales managers are more likely to blame salespeople for poor performance (or failure) than themselves, the firm, or factors external to the company. The ascribed culpability has frequently been explained using attribution theory (e.g., [3–5]). According to this theory, individuals try to understand others’ behaviors by assigning underlying causes to those behaviors. For instance, if a salesperson performs ineffectively, his/her sales manager may make an internal attribution and identify the “culprit” as the salesperson’s inept ability or low level of effort. Alternatively, the manager might make an external attribution and assign responsibility for the poor performance to outside factors such as bad economic conditions. Several studies in sales management have utilized attribution theory to discern to what sales managers ascribe salesperson’s job behavior.

Mowen, Brown, and Jackson [6] found that the difficulty of a salesperson’s task (an external attribution) does not influence sales manager ratings of salespeople’s ability, performance, or future performance expectations but that perceived effort (an internal attribution) is positively related to overall performance. Moreover, salesperson ability is negatively associated with sales manager-rated effort. Mowen et al. [7] observed that task difficulty influences sales manager ratings of salesperson ability but not salesperson performance, and that effort is positively associated with performance and sales possibilities.

Mowen, Fabes, and LaForge [8] determined that sales managers evaluate sales personnel in more difficult territories more favorably vis-à-vis performance than salespersons in less difficult territories. Also, the researchers discerned that perceived salesperson effort is positively associated with performance.

Dubinsky, Skinner, and Whittler [9] discovered that sales managers are more likely to attribute failure (a lost sale) to the salesperson (an internal attribution) with a poor work history than a good work history but to external causes when s/he has a good work history. Also, sales

managers are more likely to blame the salesperson for failure when s/he has low task difficulty but more likely to make external attributions when the salesperson faces high task difficulty.

McKay et al. [10] examined the relationship between sales managers’ perceptions of salespeople’s effort and ability to perform and types of corrective actions taken with and rewards offered to salespeople. Findings indicated that when sales managers feel the reason for low performance is low effort (a controllable factor), punitive methods are deemed appropriate; when low performance is attributed to low ability (an uncontrollable factor), though, corrective or positive methods are considered *apropos*. When rewarding sales personnel for high performance, ability was discerned to have a greater positive impact than effort on sales managers’ assessments of which rewards should be bestowed on salespeople.

Marshall, Mowen, and Fabes [11] found that territory difficulty is positively related to sales managers’ ratings of salespersons’ performance and ability. Also, effort was determined to be positively associated with raters’ assessments of salesperson performance.

Swift and Campbell [12], using vertical exchange theory, observe that when effective sales performance occurs, internal attributions are made for *cadres* (those individuals having better relationships with their sales managers) but external attributions are ascribed to *hired hands* (those salespersons having less favorable relationships with their managers). Also, managers are more likely to attribute ineffective performance to internal factors for *hired hands* than for *cadres*.

Gentry, Mowen, and Tasaki [13] discuss common biases present in sales force evaluations and offer suggestions for addressing the biases. Each one of the biases works against the salesperson and can lead a sales manager to take inappropriate action in response to the subordinate’s performance. For example, one bias that sales managers may employ is the fundamental attribution error [14]. Under such conditions, sales managers tend to overemphasize personal factors (e.g., ability, effort) and

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de-emphasize external factors (e.g., economic conditions, luck or chance) when determining the underlying causes for salespeople's performance. As such, sales managers may be prone to overlook situational factors when discerning why a salesperson has failed, as prior work has found [6, 7]; other research has observed that sales managers seemingly incorporate external factors in their performance evaluations of salespeople [8, 9, 11]. Also, although not noted in the foregoing work, managers also might engage in a “self-serving” bias [3], whereby they attribute an employee's effective performance to the manager's efforts and poor performance to the subordinate. Therefore, one would presume that under this bias, sales managers are likely to attribute salesperson failure to the job incumbent rather than the sales manager or the organization. Indeed, there is evidence to support the existence of this bias in a selling context [11].

## **Salesperson Failure vis-à-vis Sales Manager Perceptions**

Four studies were found that explored sales managers' perceptions regarding salesperson failure. Johnston, Hair, and Boles [1] asked sales managers to rate how significant a list of eight factors was to salesperson failure. The three top-ranked factors were “lacks initiative,” “poor planning and organization,” and “lacks enthusiasm.” Although the other five potential contributors were ranked lower, these too were considered significant causes of salesperson failure. The five were “lacks customer orientation,” “lacks personal goals,” “inadequate product knowledge,” “lacks proper training,” and “unable to get along with buyers.” Although this study did identify potential rationales for salesperson failure, respondents were not asked their beliefs concerning which of the prospective causes were controllable and uncontrollable by management. Such information would have been valuable to determine whether sales managers are likely to assume a “self-serving” bias.

Ingram, Schwepker, and Hutson [15] explored various facets concerning salesperson failure. Out of 29 potential

factors contributing to failure, sales executives perceived the following six to be especially significant: “poor listening skills,” “failure to concentrate on top priorities,” “a lack of sufficient effort,” “inability to determine customer needs,” “lack of planning a sales presentation,” and “inadequate product/service knowledge.” Interestingly, these six are relatively distinct from those identified in the Johnston, Hair, and Boles [1] survey. Respondents also noted that factors which are controlled primarily by salespeople are most important in inducing failure, whereas those outside the control of both the salespeople and organization are least significant. Factors that are beyond the control of sales personnel but not the firm, however, were perceived to be in the middle of the aforementioned contributors in terms of their importance in salesperson failure. These results seem to highlight that sales executives are likely to ascribe failure chiefly to the salesperson and far less so to the organization or external factors.

Morris, LaForge, and Allen [2] investigated indicators, antecedents, and outcomes of salesperson failure. The predominant exemplar of failure was “inadequate revenue generation.” “Loss of accounts,” “bad work habits,” and “unethical behavior” also were used to describe factors associated with failure. In addition, sales managers were asked about their attitudes regarding failure. Almost all respondents felt that failure was manageable and that it could be reduced through training. Interestingly, they thought that it was difficult to predict during sales force recruitment but fairly easy to prophesy once the recruit has assumed the sales job. Moreover, sales managers had an almost apathetic reaction toward failure: approximately three-quarters of the sample expected that a certain number of sales personnel would fail (but that most, however, would succeed). Furthermore, sales managers tended to attribute failure more to a personal factors (e.g., a salesperson's lack of ambition, lack of enthusiasm, or poor time management) than to company (e.g., the sales manager) or external factors. In fact, company-related contributors to salesperson failure were perceived to have far less of an impact on failure than external or personal (internal) factors. In essence, respondents were re-

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## “ . . . sales managers . . . have a decided impact on sales personnel.”

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luctant to blame themselves or their firms for failure. Of major import was the finding that over 70% of respondent firms had no formal policy for addressing failure.

Szymanski and Churchill [16] examined evaluation cues of successful and unsuccessful sales personnel. They discerned that the two groups weighted the cues differently and employed differing evaluation criteria when assessing customers. This experimental investigation, though, was not concerned explicitly with sales managers' views of salesperson failure nor with what can be done to reduce failure.

### THE QUEST FOR CONTROLLING SALESPERSON FAILURE

The preceding discussion essentially implies that when salespeople perform poorly or fail on the job, sales managers are inclined to blame their sales subordinates rather than extra- or intra-organizational factors—or themselves. Although they might consider territory (task) difficulty when ascribing reasons for an individual's performance, they seemingly have a propensity to focus on personal (internal) characteristics of the salesperson (e.g., ability, effort, initiative) rather than considering alternative rationales that may be outside the salesperson's control (e.g., training program, compensation program, competition, economic conditions). Moreover, sales managers are likely to feel that they (and even their companies) are basically inculpable for the failure. Furthermore, sales organizations apparently consider salesperson failure a *fait accompli* and have no systematic program for addressing it. Perhaps sales managers need to expand their views about what engenders salesperson failure. Inappropriate presuppositions about failure may well lead them to take incorrect action in efforts to address it.

Churchill, Ford, and Walker [17] present key variables and activities involved in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of a sales program. Their “model” comprises major elements that are associated with salesperson performance (and, by extension, failure). These include the environment, marketing strategy, sales management activities, determinants of salesperson perfor-

mance, outcomes (e.g., performance), and evaluation/control. Selected aspects of this framework are used to guide the discussion that follows. For brevity, only selected factors are described vis-à-vis salesperson failure. The factors noted, however, are illustrative of the crucial role sales managers play in controlling salesperson failure.

### The Environment

The environment facing the salesperson constitutes the external and internal (organizational) milieu. Both can have dramatic influences on salesperson failure and yet can be accommodated through sales managers' efforts.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT. A panoply of variables outside the firm clearly can contribute to salesperson effectiveness. Some of these factors include social trends, technological innovation, regulatory forces, political issues, ethical climate, cultural changes, and natural resources. Competitive intensity also has been suggested as an external factor that can adversely affect salespeople's performance [18].

*Caeteris paribus*, salespeople are likely to be less successful in territories where competition is heavily entrenched than in territories where competition is not so keen. Admittedly, a salesperson's management cannot easily stanch the emergence of competitive threats once they are extant. What it could do prior to the situation, however, is be ever vigilant and monitor what competitors are doing. What innovations are they launching? In what industries are they directing their attention? What kinds of personnel have they recently hired and are any of the new hires luminaries? Where geographically are competitors moving and why? In what segments and geographical areas are they dominant and in which ones are they emerging? Answers to these and similar kinds of questions should provide invaluable information to management that can be used to build a bulwark and preempt competition—or at least prepare for its incursion. The end result could be to facilitate the efforts of salespeople as they battle competition.

Economic conditions are another external variable that

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may impinge on salesperson performance [19, 20]. Economic downturns can steal the lifeblood of sales personnel, especially in industries vulnerable to fiscal contraction. In the short run, the situation essentially is immutable. Nonetheless, management can take action that will assist salespersons in the performance of their jobs—and thus reduce the probability of failure. Emphasizing customer service (where appropriate), modifying the performance evaluation criteria (e.g., being more input or behavior oriented [e.g., number of calls made, number of sales presentations made] rather than output or revenue driven, focusing on qualitative performance dimensions), offering programs to assist customers with their purchases (e.g., liberal credit, discount, or return policies), using technological innovations (e.g., laptop computers, electronic data interchange, personal digital assistants) to reduce costs of calling on customers, and temporarily altering the compensation/incentive package for motivational impact are all examples of what management might do to abet its sales personnel during economic declines. Moreover, managers should be monitoring the economic milieu regularly so that the adverse conditions are identified beforehand and appropriate action taken to facilitate sales force efforts during inauspicious situations.

Market potential is one other external factor that may affect territory performance [18, 21, 22]. Clearly, management can do little about its industry's potential, at least in the short run. In the longer run, however, it can take actions that could foster sales force success (and thus reduce the chances for failure). Managerial efforts might include trying to stimulate primary demand for the product class; identifying new areas of endeavor that may complement, supplement, or supplant sales in the current industry; or seeking to pique selective demand by differentiating the firm's product in a manner that leads to competitive advantage.

**INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT.** A variety of factors within the organization can have an impact on the performance (or failure) of sales personnel. Examples of such variables are company objectives; human, capital, and financial resources; company policies; and corporate philosophy and culture. Two related internal company variables are company reputation/image [19] and company experience in the territory [18, 22].

As a successful firm gains experience in a territory, it is likely to improve its image over time. After all, experienced vendors performing effectively become well-received suppliers, thus building their "capital" with customers and ultimately convincing them to buy "habitually"

(routinize the purchase behavior). Acquiring more experience in a territory can lead to the development of trust between the buyer and seller. Having a trusting relationship with the buyer can ease the selling efforts of sales personnel and reduce the chances for salesperson failure [23]. As such, then, management is charged with creating and maintaining a favorable image of its company in the eyes of the industry, prospects, and customers. Such factors as corporate culture, company policies, product quality, and customer service contribute to an organization's reputation; clearly, management is responsible for addressing these issues. Recent work suggests that salespeople's selling endeavors can be negated by the nature of these company-controlled domains [45].

Company marketing support (e.g., advertising outlays) can also contribute to the success or failure in a sales territory [18, 29, 21, 22]. Promotional support, for example, can help pre-sell the salesperson's product or service offerings. This is especially critical in industries where competitors routinely allocate marketing resources to support their sales force efforts. If a salesperson is unsuccessful in a territory where competition is keen and competitors expend dollars on marketing support to assist their sales personnel, then this salesperson is mired in a situation that is working against his/her effectiveness. The salesperson's firm has created a hindrance to selling success by failing to provide at least some kind and level of marketing assistance to its salespeople.

## **Sales Management Activities**

The activities and tasks for which sales managers are responsible have a decided impact on sales personnel [20]. Broadly defined, such activities entail a variety of assignments, including territory design, selection, training, motivation (including both financial and non-financial approaches), supervision and leadership, and evaluation. Arguably, these critical responsibilities are under the sway of sales managers. Consequently, the sales management team is culpable for the ultimate effect such activities have on the sales force.

**TERRITORY DESIGN.** Babakus et al. ([24], p. 20) state that territory design has a strong impact on salesperson performance: ". . . good selection, training, management, and motivation are necessary to have a high performance salesforce. Nonetheless, a poor territory design can prevent salespeople from performing well, even if they have the skills and exert the effort to perform well." Territory design considerations include such issues as geographi-

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## “When a salesperson is not energized, management must identify the cause . . .”

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cal size and shape, number and size of accounts, workload, and market potential.

As noted earlier, market potential is regarded as crucial in determining territory performance [18, 21, 22]. If territories are designed with inadequate potential, sales personnel will experience difficulty achieving their sales goals. (Conversely, a territory having a surfeit of potential can lead to compromised productivity and “high spotting” of accounts.) Ideally, all sales territories should be established with relatively comparable potentials [17]. Admittedly, this ideal is difficult to realize. Nonetheless, sales managers should try to design territories that are sufficiently lucrative; otherwise, they will be placing their sales personnel in a Sisyphean battle which more than likely will lead to failure.

Workload is another territory design factor that may affect performance [21, 22]. Sales personnel whose workload is too onerous are unlikely to be able to keep up with the demands of their job. Trying to prospect, make sales presentations, close sales, engage in post-sale follow-up, and attend to clamoring accounts requires a delicate balancing act, even in the best of situations. When the salesperson’s workload is excessive, s/he will feel overwhelmed and likely experience role overload, which can be a cause of ineffective performance [25]. Thus, being assigned a territory whose workload is unreasonable militates against salesperson success. So, sales personnel need to have a reasonable workload in their respective territories and be given adequate resources that facilitate their efforts in the performance of their jobs.

Research has found that sales performance tends to increase in a territory when sales are concentrated in a small number of accounts and there is little geographical dispersion across accounts [18]. Both of these factors foster enhanced salesperson efficiency. That is, when they are assigned territories with the foregoing two characteristics, sales personnel can identify and focus on the critical accounts and incur reduced travel time. Realizing this efficiency may be achieved through management’s carefully considering account concentration and territory dispersion when making territory design decisions.

**SELECTION.** When selecting individuals to fill sales positions, sales managers tend to examine physical and behavioral variables and psychological traits and abilities [17]. Physical and behavioral dimensions include such criteria as demographic, physical, background, and lifestyle characteristics. Psychological traits and abilities include such aspects as aptitude, personality, and skills; the former two are enduring features of an individual, but the latter one can change over time (through experience and training). When utilizing these kinds of criteria, recruiters are presupposing that the dimensions are related to salesperson performance.

Selecting the “right” candidate tends to be a Gordian knot for sales managers. No tried and true method exists to identify unequivocally individuals who will be effective performers. Similarly, there is no set of personal characteristics that unambiguously predicts sales performance [26, 27]. As Ford et al. ([27], p. 129) state, “. . . the determinants of sales performance are job specific.” Trying to determine antecedents of salesperson performance has been, and continues to be, like searching for the “Holy Grail.” Notwithstanding this situation, sales managers cannot simply throw up their hands and proclaim that their hiring efforts are purely a crap shoot; their doing so would only be an abdication of a crucial sales management responsibility. After all, they are the final arbiter in hiring decisions and thus have the final accountability for these decisions.

Clearly, the wrong people can be hired to assume sales positions. Furthermore, admittedly, prior research has not been especially instructive regarding what factors to consider when selecting salespersons. Nonetheless, sales managers must be circumspect when hiring sales personnel. Although indubitably unscientific, use of managerial instinct, company and industry experience, and observation may be useful in reducing the number of “go” and “no go” hiring errors. Moreover, certain general guidelines may be followed. For instance, job matching has long been suggested as a means of aligning the right person with the right job. In a selling context, this would entail enumerating the salient job tasks, assignments, and responsibilities (perhaps via a job analysis or job descrip-

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# “The sales management team has the wherewithal to facilitate . . . performance . . .”

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tion) and then identifying germane characteristics that a salesperson presumably needs to fill the position [28]. This person-job fit approach basically is an attempt to provide some structure to and a rationale for hiring salespeople and thus decrease the likelihood of salesperson failure.

**TRAINING.** Training essentially is an organizational attempt to compress the kinds of learning that one gains through experience into a relatively short period of time [20]. It essentially is designed to ameliorate trainees' work-related skill levels. As such, it has been suggested as having a potentially critical impact on salesperson performance [19, 26]. Furthermore, there is some empirical evidence that sales managers feel sales force training programs can have an effect on salesperson failure [1, 2].

Inadequately training sales personnel can leave them bereft of the skills necessary to confront the dynamism and competitive intensity in their territories. Clearly, some firms prefer to defer training until management feels confident that the job incumbent is appropriate for the job and will gain from his/her on-the-job experience [17]. But ill-trained salespersons embody defenseless chickens that are about to be set upon by the fox guarding the chicken coop.

Contemporary salespeople need to possess an abundance of knowledge (e.g., product, market, competitive, company, customer) and skill (e.g., adaptiveness, sales presentation, interpersonal, closing) to execute their job successfully. Training can assist in providing this knowledge and skill. For instance, sales training has been suggested as a forum for improving salespeople's role accuracy and clarity and decreasing role conflict [20], enhancing salespersons' procedural knowledge [29], indirectly augmenting their capacity to be adaptive [30], and assisting in their becoming facile in making sales presentations [31]. Given the import of training, then, sales managers have an imperative to make concerted efforts to augment the knowledge base and skill level of their sales forces (thereby reducing the chances for salesperson failure).

**MOTIVATION.** Findings from studies exploring the causes of salesperson failure suggest that sales managers

think a major reason for failure is salespeople's lack of initiative, ambition, or enthusiasm [1, 2]. Each one of these descriptors is inextricably linked to motivation. Sales personnel who demonstrate a general absence of initiative or drive basically are not compelled to execute their job tasks. Their shortage of verve, though, basically rests on sales management's shoulders. Company practices, policies, and programs (e.g., closeness of supervision, proportion of sales personnel promoted into management, emphasis placed on salary versus incentive pay or nonfinancial rewards) are likely to influence various elements of salespeople's motivation [17]. Also, prior work has found that sales managers tend to believe that methods used to motivate the sales force are important in contributing to salesperson failure [2].

When a salesperson is not energized, management must identify the cause for the enervation. Perhaps it is a result of temporary personal problems that will soon be resolved. Maybe it is engendered by the individual's long- or short-term track record. Perchance it is a consequence of management inattention. Or possibly it is an outcome of an inadequate sales compensation and reward program. Whatever the reason, however, management is responsible for and charged with discovering the explanation for the lack of motivation and finding a solution to it.

Previous sales force research shows that various aspects of motivation (e.g., expectancies, instrumentalities, valences) can vary across sales personnel (e.g., [32–34]). Such findings highlight the importance of sales managers' trying to discover what “triggers” each salesperson's behavior. For instance, a “one size fits all” motivational package may be administratively efficient but might only constrain optimum motivation and ultimate effectiveness of the sales force. Clearly, then, the motivation of each salesperson can be influenced through organizational interventions.

**SUPERVISION/LEADERSHIP.** Walker, Churchill, and Ford [20, 35] posit that one variable affecting salesperson performance is sales manager supervision. Moreover, Jolson et al. [36] state that a sales manager's leadership style can have a dramatic impact on his/her salespeople's

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performance. The underlying premise behind the arguments of these authors is that the degree and quality of interaction between the sales manager and the sales subordinate will influence the effectiveness with which the salesperson executes his/her job tasks. Indeed, evidence from previous investigations tend to confirm these suppositions.

For example, span of control [18] and quality of the sales manager [21] have been shown to be related to territory performance. The nature of the relationship between sales managers and their subordinates has been found to be associated with salespeople's performance (e.g., [37, 38]). Moreover, the degree of "active involvement" sales managers have with their sales personnel has been determined to affect salesperson performance [39]. In addition, Markin and Lillis [40] proposed that the expectations sales managers have of their salespeople will be positively related to their salespersons' performance—the "Pygmalion effect." Some research in psychology has observed this tendency (see, for example, a brief review by Sutton and Woodman [41]).

The foregoing discussion illustrates that both sales supervision and leadership can affect sales force performance. So, when salespeople fail, part of the rationale for the phenomenon seemingly can be traced to the quality and degree with which the sales manager interacts with his/her sales subordinates.

**EVALUATION.** Evaluating salespeople's performance basically entails comparing actual salesperson performance with the objectives established for that individual during the fiscal period, determining why the deviations (if any) occurred, and taking corrective action where needed. Sales force evaluation has multifarious purposes. It can serve as a basis for making promotion, transfer, and termination decisions; determining changes in a salesperson's compensation (both amount and kind); and identifying strengths and weaknesses of a salesperson and providing feedback to that person [42, 43]. Recent research, however, suggests that sales managers appear to be uncertain about what are the most appropriate bases with which to evaluate salespeople [44].

An effective evaluation can be very instructive for sales personnel. After all, knowing what an individual's strengths are should afford one opportunity to leverage those strengths to advantage. Alternatively, being cognizant of a person's weaknesses should be a wake-up call for both the salesperson and sales manager that certain work needs to be done to address the weaknesses. Ignoring such signs will most likely exacerbate a problem over time.

Through evaluation of sales personnel, sales managers can discern in what areas (e.g., knowledge, skill) the salesperson needs enhancement. Additional training, closer supervision, coaching, and follow-up may be necessary if the individual's effectiveness is to be improved. The deficit in performance, however, in all likelihood will be sustained (and over time worsened) if the sales subordinate's sales manager fails to assess adequately the salesperson's performance and take constructive, corrective action. The end result may well be not just a short-term decrease in performance, but a long-term decline ultimately leading to salesperson failure.

## CONCLUSION

The major purpose of this article was to provide support (using both extant literature and concomitant dialectic) for the presupposition that the reasons for a salesperson's failure ultimately reside with sales management. No matter what excuses the sales management team might offer for the subpar performer (e.g., dismal economic conditions, intense competition, inadequate selling skills, little initiative or drive), the simple fact of the matter is that the rationale offered can be dispatched with by clearly assigning responsibility to the sales management team.

For example, management can monitor the external environment to identify trends that may bode ill for the sales force. When such trends are discerned, altering the organizations's infrastructure may be required to abet salespeople's performance. A sales manager's merely using a disclaimer such as, "I can't do anything now about the competitive intensity in Joe's territory," is not justifiable—and clearly does nothing to assist the aggrieved salesperson. In addition, the sales management team has to work within the internal environment's constraints (e.g., company reputation) to assist sales personnel in dealing with a difficult situation.

Several sales management activities—and the adeptness with which they are executed—clearly can make or break a salesperson. The decision behind selecting an inappropriate sales recruit resides with the sales management team. A sour apple after it is picked off the tree is a sour apple, and it retains that natural state. Similarly, a "bad apple" who is clearly inept for a sales position is immutable. No amount of training, motivating, or supervising will significantly modify the individual's sales prowess. This "go" hiring error rests with management, not the failing salesperson.

What sales management does to a salesperson after s/he has been hired is critical to sales success [26]. An appropriately designed territory, adequate training, stimulating compensation and reward programs, skilled supervision and leadership, and sound sales force evaluation can enhance salespeople's skills and thus their effectiveness. Conversely, designing poorly conceived territories, providing no or insufficient sales training, creating motivational schemes that are not attuned to a salesperson's needs and concerns, supervising or leading in a manner that does a disservice to the skill and ability level of the salesperson (e.g., a too close or too loose supervisory style), or insufficiently assaying salesperson performance and then offering inappropriate or destructive feedback only assists in contributing to salesperson failure.

Some sales managers are likely to demur with this essay's dialectic. They will likely insist that there obviously are situations where factors beyond management's control can lead to salesperson failure: "What about a poor economy, unexpected dramatic market incursions from competitors, continual slowdowns in production runs owing to raw material shortages, the departure of a key account from the salesperson's territory, or even an unmotivated salesperson?" After extensive rumination, however, hopefully they will alter their positions and opine that yes, indeed, sales management is the one party truly responsible for salesperson failure. To think otherwise, seemingly would be folly and an abdication of management's responsibility.

The sales management team has the wherewithal to facilitate high levels of performance from the sales force. But is also has the capacity to foster salesperson failure through the action (or inaction) it takes. Clearly, salespeople have a role to play in how well they execute their job assignments. Whether they succeed or fail in the long run, however, is inevitably directly traceable to what their sales managers have done.

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