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Factors Influencing Sales Manager Effectiveness: Preliminary Findings and Future Research Directions

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FACTORS INFLUENCING SALES MANAGER EFFECTIVENESS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS[*]

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Abstract
Ruthlessness is a relatively unexplored concept within the marketing discipline. However, recent evidence has suggested it is linked to organisational and managerial performance. The authors examine the theoretical background and provide a foundation for future research by delineating the construct's domain. The results of a qualitative study examining the usage of the term "ruthless" in national news and business publications are also reported and discussed. Limitations and directions for future research are then examined.

Keywords: Sales Management; Discipline; Construct Development; Qualitative

1. Introduction

In today's business world, one hears the word "ruthless" used to describe many things; from a chief executive, a self-made entrepreneur, a programme of mass redundancy, to an entire organisation. In fact, many of the most successful business people today have been described as ruthless. But just what, exactly, is this concept of ruthlessness? Is it a type of personality, a type of behaviour, both of these, or neither? The fact of the matter is that one can ask ten people this question, and receive ten different answers. Some may say ruthlessness is simply "someone who doesn't care about anyone else"; others may describe ruthlessness as "doing anything to get ahead"; still others may say it is "behaving dispassionately"; there is just no generally agreed upon definition of what it means to be ruthless in business. This situation is reflected in a general lack of consideration in academic literature of the ruthlessness concept. In fact, with the current managerial "state-of-the-art" being more concerned with things such as "empowerment" (e.g. Simons 1995), and "participatory management" (e.g. Collins 1997), a concept such as ruthlessness may be almost "taboo". However, in the sole academic paper to concern itself with managerial ruthlessness as a separate concept, Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996) suggest that ruthlessness is an important determinant of managerial performance. Specifically, employees are resources, and poorly performing or under-utilised resources cost the firm money. Therefore, effectively dealing with either poor performers or under-utilised human resources, through measures such as discipline, dismissal or redundancy, is likely to substantially improve the organisation's competitiveness, all other things remaining equal.

In the case of the sales force, however, these issues are likely to be of particular importance, for many organisations, salespeople are the revenue producers: therefore, poorly performing salespeople effect the bottom line directly by reducing the revenue of the firm. The salesperson also performs a key relationship building role, and the impact of unethical actions or organisationally undesirable behaviours can have additional, longer term effects, by impacting on the performance of colleagues, harming the organisation's image, and weakening

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the relationship the firm has with its customer base. Thus, the sales manager's ability to effectively deal with poorly performing sales people will have a direct effect on the organisation's sales and profits, in both the short- and long-term.

The purpose of this paper is to build upon the foundation provided by Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996), to provide a comprehensive delineation of the construct of managerial ruthlessness, and to apply it to the context of the organisational sales force. The approach is both literature based and empirical; consisting of a review of the relevant academic literature and an interpretive study and content analysis of newspapers and business periodicals. This approach is designed to explore issues relating to ruthlessness in the academic literature, as well as to gain insight into what the concept of ruthlessness means in common usage. The following section presents the existing academic theory relating to ruthlessness, and also its potential role within sales force management.

2.   Theoretical Background
2.1.   Existing Literature Dealing With Ruthlessness

In what appears to be the sole article that explicitly concerns itself with ruthlessness (Rieple and Vyakarnam 1996), the authors stop short of providing a clear definition of the domain of ruthlessness, only describing it as: "[referring] to the way in which managers dismiss or otherwise deal with poorly performing staff" (p. 17). In this definition, it is implied that ruthlessness is a behavioural construct, and this view is echoed throughout the article.

Additionally, a search of psychological literature revealed little substantive consideration of the concept of ruthlessness as a separate construct. However, ruthlessness is considered in some articles in the psychological literature as some kind of antithesis to concepts of: "concern" (Pizer 1992); "humane" (de Montmollin and Rogard 1987); or "caring" (Jones 1987). Furthermore, ruthlessness also appears to be considered a "male" concept in discussions of male psychology (e.g. Fine 1986). Overall, the psychological literature concerning ruthlessness, albeit limited, seems to view ruthlessness as some kind of internal personality trait.

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The present study takes the behavioural view of ruthlessness, rather than the trait view. The reason for this is that, in conceptual terms, a behaviour can be described as "ruthless" independent of the internal personality traits of the manager performing that behaviour. Specifically, a manager can action a "ruthless" behaviour – for instance making 500 employees redundant – regardless of whether they have a high level of some internal ruthlessness trait. The simple fact is that a behaviour has taken place, whatever the manager's internal feelings were.

Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996) focus on the impact of ruthless behaviour on the effectiveness of managers and the overall firm, finding some evidence that ruthless behaviour positively effects both of these. While they provide some insight into what ruthless behaviours could be, there is little consideration of what makes these behaviours "ruthless". However, it can be inferred that ruthless behaviour appears to consist of three core elements. The first core element is an objective or dispassionate focus on organisational goals. This means that the criteria for any behaviour is solely how the outcome will benefit the organisation, rather than its consequences on the objects of the behaviour. The emotional content of the behaviour, such as pity for those effected, must have no influence on the behaviour being performed. Secondly is decisiveness; this involves the ability of a manager to make clear, final decisions, without putting them off. The third and final element proposed is that ruthless behaviours must have some kind of unpleasant consequences for those effected by them. Any of these elements may be present separately in other types of behaviour, however, when all three are present in a single behaviour, then it can be considered as ruthless.

2.2. Ruthlessness and Sales Management

Sales force research has undergone a dramatic increase in size during the last one or two decades. However, this literature, as reviewed by Bush and Grant (1994), is strongly biased towards researching the sales person, rather than the sales manager. Sales research has tended to treat the behaviour of managers as less important than understanding the performance of salespeople (Russ,

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McNeilly and Comer 1996). This has resulted in a large body of literature on effective salespeople but relatively little knowledge of what distinguishes an effective sales manager from an ineffective one (Armstrong, Pecotich and Mills 1993). Recent research findings, as described in Rieple and Vyakarnam's (1996) paper, suggest the possibility that ruthlessness could be one such distinguishing factor.

While Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996) provide preliminary evidence of the importance of ruthlessness in a general management context, the sales force occupies a unique situation within the organisation. In many cases it is the major, and sometimes the sole, revenue producer for a given organisation (Dubinsky et al 1992). Therefore, poorly performing salespeople threaten the bottom line of an organisation directly. As well as a revenue producer, the sales person also performs a key relationship building role. Thus poor performers can also impact on the long term profits of a firm. It can be seen, then, that ruthlessness may be even more important to organisational performance in the sales context, since a poorly performing sales person is likely to have a more damaging effect on both short and long term organisational performance than a more general staff member.

Additionally, sales people are usually separated from their managers physically, socially, and psychologically (Jackson, Tax and Barnes 1994). This requires sales managers to deal with their staff without the benefit of frequent face-to-face contact, which a more general manager may enjoy (DelVecchio 1998). The outcome of this is that sales managers who do not make necessary decisions on poor performers may find that the problem escalates much more easily than it would for a general manager. This is because the distance between the sales manager and sales person, coupled with the lack of frequent contact, allow a poor performer more time and latitude to cause problems. For example, if a manager does not dismiss a poor sales person at, say, the June monthly meeting, it may be July until the next chance. In the meantime the sales person can cause serious damage to the organisation. A general manager, who sees their staff every day, would likely have less opportunity to delay such decisions. This problem is compounded by the relatively long time span between the effort expended and the

actual result generated (Jackson, Tax and Barnes 1994). Thus when the sales manager gets the first indication of a poor performer, they may have already caused substantial damage to the organisation.

The sales person's role as a boundary spanner is also a key factor in the discussion. Specifically, this context has a high potential to create role conflict and consequently stress (Behrman and Perreault 1984). This stress has substantial potential to result in unethical business practices (Dubinsky et al 1992). In the long term, unethical sales force behaviours negatively effect the organisation. If sales managers wish to lessen unethical behaviours, then they must respond appropriately to them when they are discovered, often in the form of disciplinary action (DeConinck 1992). Thus, it stands to reason that ruthlessness will play an important role in controlling unethical sales force behaviours.

2.3. Discipline and Punishment

The area of the punishment or discipline of staff is closely related to that of ruthlessness, indeed Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996) consider ruthlessness to be solely concerned with the issue of disciplining poorly performing staff. However, while punishment of errant or under-performing staff is something that every manager must deal with eventually, it seems to have been the subject of little empirical examination (Butterfield, Trevino and Ball 1996).

Recent research has expanded the previously negative view of punishment, casting it within a potentially more positive light, and widening the focus from mainly the subordinate, to other organisational members, including the manager (Butterfield, Trevino and Ball 1996). For example, Trevino (1992) considered the effects of punishment on those beyond the manager-subordinate dyad. She proposed that these individuals, or "observers", could feel a range of emotions in reaction to the act of punishment. These included pleasure at seeing justice being done, as well as attitudinal responses such as loyalty to and trust of the manager who was seen protecting their interests. Butterfield, Trevino and Ball (1996) built on this foundation and empirically examined what managers think and feel about punishing subordinates. Perhaps most crucially, they find that there are positive

consequences to punishment; specifically, they found that employees often expected managers to punish errant staff and felt that it was fair to do so. The act of punishing employees thus resulted in outcomes such as such as increased respect and vicarious learning from observers, and a corresponding increase in workgroup performance. Thus, with ruthlessness being so closely related to these punishment issues (Rieple and Vyakarnam 1996), it seems likely that ruthless behaviour will have positive effects on work group performance, organisational performance, and the manager-subordinate relationship.

Further research into discipline has found that employees with a high level of prior performance receive less severe discipline than otherwise, and that serious performance failures were more likely to receive severe punishment (DeConinck 1992). Bellizzi and Hite (1989), indicate that gender may also have an effect on punishment severity, with females being penalised less severely than males. Butterfield, Trevino and Ball (1996), also find that managers may be influenced in their punishment decisions by the external situation of the employee; for example a salesperson with substantial responsibilities, such as a young family, may receive a certain degree of leniency that an unattached salesperson may not. These findings imply that the salesperson's characteristics, situation, and work history will influence the amount of ruthlessness shown by the manager.

2.4. General Management: Decision Making, Power, and Machiavellianism

There is a large body of literature relating to management in general, however, only a small proportion of this attempts to link managerial behaviours to the actual success of an individual manager or organisation (Rieple and Vyakarnam 1996). Even though none of these works discuss the concept of ruthlessness *per se*, there are a number of issues related to ruthlessness that are covered. Literature on managerial decision making provides a number of insights into decisiveness, one of the three core elements of ruthlessness. McCall and Kaplan (1990), define two ends of a continuum of action; quick (which can be considered as conceptually similar to decisive), and convoluted, and discuss when

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each is appropriate. They find that both types are appropriate for different situations, enabling the inference that ruthlessness may not always be the most appropriate course of action. This suggests the potential for a number of moderators of any relationship between ruthlessness and performance.

Other literature on managerial decision making also provides insights into the potential importance of ruthlessness; and in particular, that which discusses the concept of escalation. Drummond (1991) applies escalation to the situation of dismissing unsatisfactory employees. In this situation, management must make a decision on whether to withdraw from the situation (dismiss the employee), or persist with the situation (retain the employee) in the hope that performance will improve. This decision must be made in light of the sunk costs of recruiting an employee, and the fact that the consequences of both courses of action are unclear and potentially harmful, and this situation often leads to escalation (Zajac and Bazerman 1991). In situations such as this, ruthlessness may play a critical role in allowing a manager to escape from potential disaster. Conceptually, if a manager can objectively analyse a situation, and then decisively take action, even if it results in unpleasant outcomes for some, they will have a far greater ability to exit an escalation situation.

Work on power within organisations also offers some insights. For example, both Kotter (1982), and Pfeffer (1992) identify something akin to ruthlessness when they discuss how managers remove subordinates in order to develop their personal networks of power. However, this concept differs from ruthlessness as conceptualised here, because the primary motive of the former seems to be personal gain (building a network of power), rather than organisational benefit.

A strongly related concept is that of Machiavellianism, which has received a considerable amount of interest in both management and marketing research, including sales management (Sparks 1994). A highly Machiavellian person has been described as: "one who employs *aggressive, manipulative, exploiting* and *devious* means in order to achieve *personal* and organizational objectives" (emphasis added, Calhoon 1969, p. 211). Ruthlessness and Machiavellianism

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differ conceptually in a number of ways. Firstly, as previously hypothesised, ruthlessness has a sole focus on organisational objectives. Furthermore, ruthless behaviour does not have to be either aggressive, manipulative, exploitative or devious, although it may in some cases be. However, although Machiavellianism is not the same as ruthlessness, it does seem to overlap. While Machiavellianism has been related to success, importantly, it has been theorised that a variable called latitude for improvisation may moderate the effect of Machiavellianism on success (Sparks 1994). It is generally considered that the sales context is characterised by a higher latitude for improvisation (Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1997). This looks to add further weight to any positive relationship between ruthlessness and sales managerial performance.

2.5. Summary

In summary, the previous discussion raises a number of issues which, together, provide a robust argument for both the existence of the proposed construct of ruthlessness, and its particular importance in the sales context. Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996) provide a first attempt at examining ruthless managerial behaviour, finding that it may enhance managerial effectiveness. Related behaviour is also found in literature dealing with punishment of staff, decision making, managerial power, and Machiavellianism. However, the proposed three part construct of ruthlessness looks to be sufficiently unique as to warrant separate consideration from these areas. Furthermore, the sales context also appears to be one in which the concept of ruthlessness has much to offer, and is substantively different enough to require especial study. Thus the case for explicating both the construct of ruthlessness and its nomological net looks to be a compelling one. In the further sections of this paper, the authors report on an interpretive study aimed at providing additional insight into the content of ruthlessness.

3. Methodology

The analysis consisted of the in-depth examination of 98 articles gathered from a database of major national news and business publications in New Zealand

and Australia. The objective of this analysis was to obtain insights into the meanings commonly attributed to ruthlessness, or what can be called a "received view" of ruthlessness. Since the academic treatment of ruthlessness seems to be novel, grounding the concept in its common usage in this way should provide an important source of insight into its conceptual makeup.

Because the purpose of the analysis was theory discovery (cf. Deshpandé 1983), it was important to tap as wide a range of perspectives as possible. To this end every business related article from the past two years containing the words "ruthless", "ruthlessly", or "ruthlessness" was examined. Care was taken to ensure the tapping of perspectives from explicitly business oriented publications and also general newspapers. Specifically, the sample consisted of: 13 from the Sydney Morning Herald; 17 from the Melbourne Age; 20 from the Australian Financial Review; 9 from the Independent Business Weekly (NZ); 15 from the New Zealand Herald; 14 from the National Business Review (NZ); 7 from the Dominion (NZ); and one from the Business Review Weekly. The sample is thus well suited for obtaining a broad range of insights into the conceptual domain of ruthlessness.

The analysis design is essentially qualitative, in keeping with the exploratory aim of the study. Specifically, the method used is strongly based upon Thompson's (1997) hermeneutical approach, albeit modified in some ways. However, it is recognised that the present design is not strictly hermeneutic in that it does not use the participants' own accounts, but rather "second-hand" journalistic reports of them. Additionally, the more quantitative techniques of content analysis are also used (cf. Krippendorf 1980). The adaptation of techniques and methods to suit the objectives of a particular study is a process strongly advocated in research of this kind (Miles and Huberman 1994) and the authors considered that combining a number of different perspectives would result in the richest set of findings possible from the data.

The first stage in the analysis was an intratext one, where the text of the article was read in its entirety a number of times in order to gain some appreciation of the overall, holistic, "essence" of the text (Thompson 1997; Miles

and Huberman 1994). This approach has its roots in a phenomenological perspective (Miles and Huberman 1994), aiming to gain some form of practical understanding of the meanings associated with the concept of ruthlessness. The second stage was an intertextual one. Following from Thompson (1997), patterns were searched for across different articles. However, as well as taking an interpretive approach as described above, the occurrences of a number of different issues which emerged from the literature review were coded, in the spirit of content analysis (cf. Krippendorf 1980). These key issues are displayed in Table 1, along with the number of times each occurred.

Table 1: Content Analysis Results

Category	*Count*	*Category*	*Count*
Necessary for organisational survival or improved performance	29	Not necessary for organisational survival or improved performance	1
Negative consequences for object of behaviour	17	Positive consequences for object of behaviour	0
Negative societal/social consequences	12	Positive societal/social consequences	1
Actor described as effective in job	18	Actor not described as effective in job	0
Actor described unfavourably as a human being	5	Actor described favourably as a human being	0
Behaviour described as separate from emotional factors	6	Behaviour not separated from emotional factors	0

4. Results

The most compelling theme to emerge from the interpretation of the data was strongly related to the core element of objectivity. Specifically, in almost every single article, the term ruthless was used to indicate a disregard for the consequences of a behaviour on those it effected. The key criteria was interpreted as how a behaviour helped the organisation reach its goals, rather than the outcome for those individuals effected by the behaviour. Thus ruthlessness emphasises objective criteria, such as performance or profit, rather than the more subjective criteria, such as the feelings of those effected.

A related concept to this was the separation of ruthless behaviours from emotions. Whenever emotional issues were mentioned in the articles, the ruthless behaviour was described as a separate issue. This can be seen from the content analysis results as shown in Table 1. Thus, the data implied that ruthless behaviour could be performed by those that felt emotions such as pity, but were able to separate the emotional factors out and make the decision dispassionately and objectively.

The outcomes of ruthless actions were characterised as overwhelmingly negative for those effected by them. Those effected were almost invariably employees or – as commonly implied by the more left wing political texts – society as a whole. Of those articles that explicitly mentioned the consequences of ruthless actions on those effected, only a single article talked in positive terms, and this referred to the national economy. However, a strong contrast could be discerned when the business or organisational consequences of ruthless behaviour were discussed. In this case the outcomes were overwhelmingly positive. In fact, in 29 cases ruthless behaviour was described as either necessary for organisational survival, or resulting in improved/superior organisational performance. Furthermore, in 18 cases, the ruthless actor was described as effective in their job. In no cases was a decision maker or organisation described as ineffective.

Interestingly, whether ruthlessness could be interpreted as "good" or "bad" generally depended on the viewpoint of the writer. Most texts written from left-wing or socialist perspectives characterised ruthlessness as bad; or even "evil", in some cases. By contrast, articles emerging from more business-oriented, free market or capitalist viewpoints seemed to characterise ruthlessness as neither implicitly good nor bad, but simply an issue of necessity.

5. Discussion and Synthesis

The findings from the text analysis and the literature review provide support for the proposed three part conceptualisation of ruthless behvaiour. The results from the text analysis show that ruthlessness, when grounded in common

usage, implies some kind of positive outcome for the actor, at the cost of some unpleasant outcome for the individual(s) effected by the decision.

One would expect that such behaviour would be extremely emotionally stressful. This expectation is backed up by literature on discipline (e.g. Butterfield, Trevino and Ball 1996), which looks to be a major part of ruthless behaviour (cf. Rieple and Vyakarnam 1996). This stress would naturally influence the likelihood of such a decision being made, thus the necessity to objectively concentrate on the organisational outcomes of the behaviour, rather than the more unpleasant consequences. This proposal was also supported by the results.

Thus, the literature review indicates that indeed some necessary managerial behaviours may result in organisational benefit, but also in some harm to those effected. Analysis supports the contention that these behaviours can be classed as "ruthless". It can be seen, then, that there is support for two of the proposed three core elements of ruthlessness: the objective focus on organisational goals; and the unpleasant consequences for the individual(s) effected by the decision.

The third core element, decisiveness, receives little support from the findings. None of the articles explicitly mentioned decisiveness as a characteristic of ruthless behaviour, and neither was it a theme to emerge from the interpretation of those texts. However, conceptually, perhaps decisiveness is not something that makes a behaviour ruthless, but rather an element necessary for a ruthless behaviour to be made. Decisiveness is concerned with the ability to make a decision of finality, and stick to that decision (cf. Drummond 1991), and also has an element of speed associated with it. Because ruthless behaviour is extremely difficult to perform (Rieple and Vyakarnam 1996), without decisiveness the behaviour may very well never be performed. Thus, a ruthless behaviour, in order to be actually be performed, must include an element of decisiveness. The lack of support in the data can be explained by the argument that decisiveness does not contribute to the "ruthless" aspect of ruthless behaviour but, rather, the "behaviour" component.

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The findings of this study also lend support to evidence that ruthlessness has positive consequences for organisational performance, as found by Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996). Specifically, the fact that 29 of the articles analysed explicitly associated either improved organisational performance or organisational survival with ruthlessness provides a significant indication of the potential benefits of ruthlessness.

Theoretical support is also evident, from the literature review, that the concept of ruthlessness is especially relevant to the sales context. Of particular importance was the fact that sales people have a greater potential to create damage, and also that the damage caused may be of greater significance, than more general staff. Furthermore, the sales manager may have greater difficulty in dealing with sales people due to the physical and psychological distance between each other, as well as the infrequent contact that sales people have with sales managers.

6.   Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The primary aim of this study was to delineate the construct of ruthlessness, and to explore some of its potential antecedents and consequences, in the sales force context. While the paper develops and finds support for a three-part construct, there are some limitations to the approach used. Firstly, it is recognised that the results of the analysis may be influenced by national culture. For example, the New Zealand or Australian usage of the word "ruthless" may differ from, say, a Japanese usage. Furthermore, ruthlessness as a concept may be different in another culture, and it also may have different effects. In fact, in some cultures, ruthlessness may conceivably have negative consequences. Secondly, the primarily interpretive research design is limited in its generalisability. However, it is noted that theory discovery was the primary objective of the study, rather than the drawing of general conclusions. Additionally, it is recognised that the journalistic reports used as data may have some inherent biases. The research design used here was also limited in its ability to explicate a full conceptual framework, and to tap into the "cause-and-effect" maps of actual managers (see

Zaltman, LeMasters and Heffring 1982). Thus, it can be seen that there is substantial scope for future research.

An important area for future research is that of a study of actual organisation members, in order to elicit their opinions on both ruthlessness itself, and its antecedents and consequences. This could consist of a set of in-depth interviews with subordinates, managers, and those higher in the hierarchy. Cross-cultural research would also be useful; for example, exploring the differences between Asian and Western-style business cultures in terms of the place of ruthlessness within these different cultural contexts. Furthermore, as well as disciplining staff, ruthlessness may be important in organisational change situations, thus, an examination of the effect that ruthlessness may have on the success of organisational change programmes could prove fruitful. Other aspects of ruthlessness, such as when making decisions on low-profit customers, or suppliers, would also be interesting avenues to explore, particularly in today's political and economic climate.

In conclusion, this paper has built upon the foundation provided by Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996), in order to provide a clearer picture of what managerial ruthlessness actually consists of. It has also explored some of the possible antecedents of, and consequences to, ruthlessness, with particular regard given to its role in the sales force context. The findings have primarily theoretical applications at this early stage, in that they represent somewhat of a first step towards the development of a measure of ruthlessness, for use in testing any conceptual framework. However, the findings give some indication to managers of the potential importance of ruthlessness, and thus provide a welcome consideration of what may be something of a "taboo" area in current management theory and practice.

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