Empathy and Political Skill: Improving Salespeople’s Value Enhancing Behavior Performance

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Empathy and Political Skill: Improving Salespeople’s Value Enhancing Behavior Performance

Megan C. Good
Charles H. Schwepker, Jr.

ABSTRACT

Little is known about the interface between empathy and political skill in sales. This study develops a model to reflect these characteristics and their impact on performance. Results from a study of 240 B2B salespeople contradict the a priori assumption that empathy may not be positively related to sales performance and challenge existing stereotypes that salespeople are not empathetic. Importantly, the findings show sellers employing empathy can generate enhanced outcomes. Also, this study extends our understanding that utilizing political influence spreads the benefit of empathy beyond the impact itself. Politically skilled B2B salespeople can better understand and display their empathy and then persuade and direct customers to mutually advantageous decisions. The identification of new behavioral selling tools may benefit sellers as researchers gain further insight into maximizing selling behaviors.

Keywords: Salespeople, Empathy, Political skill, Value enhancing Behavior performance

INTRODUCTION

Selling is a necessary activity that generates positive outcomes that allow firms to survive. For this reason, understanding factors contributing to sales performance has become vital to academic and practitioner investigations. A stream of sales research has begun to explore potential characteristics that may impact important sales outcomes. Various factors have been proposed to affect sales performance according to a recent meta-analysis (Kerr & Marcos-Cuevas, 2023). Two specific qualities (empathy and political skill) have been identified as key (Delpechitre et al., 2019; Nadella, 2017; Kimura et al., 2019). The importance of empathy and political skill, however, has been examined in the context of seeing these variables as unique contributors to the sales process. That is, each contributes to sales performance, but does so without assistance or detraction from the other.

To establish and develop complex commercial exchanges, sellers must navigate individual and organizational connections that require an understanding of the buyer’s views to influence contacts toward a positive sales outcome. Mayer & Greenberg (2006) devoted seven years of research and reported their finding that the flawed sales selection

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processes did not account for a basic quality of good salespeople: empathy. Researchers suggest the customer orientation-loyalty connection is incomplete without a salesperson's empathy (Gerlach et al., 2016). However, little is known about the direct relationship between empathy and sales performance (Kalra et al., 2023), with some suggesting empathy is not positively related to sales performance (Dawson et al., 1992). Some have assumed salespeople do not have empathy because their sales behaviors appear to focus on just closing the sale as opposed to behaviors designed to enhance customer value. Further, it is reasonable to question if empathy alone is sufficient, or, if and how empathy can be employed with other important characteristics to further extend positive returns. This study examines empathy’s relationship with sales behaviors and attempts to dispel earlier misconceptions.

Empathy is the ability to understand business needs from the customer’s viewpoint when recommending a product or service. Not unexpectedly, some salespeople lack empathy because they are too preoccupied with focusing on customers as transactions instead of understanding them or their problems. Perhaps for this reason, only limited research has investigated empathy and its effect on sales performance (Kalra et al., 2017; Kalra et al., 2023; Agnihotri & Krush, 2015). Empathy may be a part of the complex selling practice as it likely plays an important role in salespeople’s performance of value enhancing behaviors. However, this remains unexplored.

From a practical selling perspective, utilizing multiple characteristics broadens the selling approach, and offers additional opportunities to present desired buyer signals. From a research perspective, intermixing two behavioral traits allows a more complex but precise understanding of salespeople. The ability to induce others through an accumulation of social abilities capable of influencing others known as political skill (Ferris et al., 2007) has drawn considerable research attention, although political skill examinations within marketing (e.g., Li et al., 2017) are limited and sales applications remain fairly new (Schwepker & Good, 2021; Good & Schwepker, 2022a). Previous research has yet to examine empathy with or without the use of political skill to leverage outcome results in improved performance. It is not known, as with some politicians, if salespeople misuse political skill to produce self-serving (Ferris et al., 2000) and damaging behaviors (e.g., putting one’s interests above the needs of the firm or customer).

Or, do they use political skill to demonstrate their empathy for customers which heightens performance behaviors that add value for customers? Although it is known that social interactions impact (Zhang et al., 2020) sales outcomes (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021) and are linked to performance (Munyon et al., 2015; Munyon et al., 2021; Bolander et al., 2015), it is not clear if salespeople benefit from empathy in the B2B arena the same as in B2C positions (Gerlach et al., 2016) and it is unknown if political skill in more complex B2B exchanges serves as the mechanism by which empathy leads to value enhancing behaviors, where empathetic salespeople might be able to better leverage political skill to drive sales. Therefore, these voids underscore the need to measure the mediation effect of political skill.

The current study has the opportunity to make several significant contributions. First, it broadens our understanding of empathy and its impact on sales performance (as called for by Munyon et al., 2015). Hence, despite considerable discussions about empathy, the sales literature has not fully assessed its influence on performance, leaving vacuums in understanding its value. This is critical because managers regularly direct salespeople to understand “customer perspectives” when engaging in sales transactions. Yet, does being empathic increase salesperson outcomes, or does it simply allow sellers to have a different view of the decisional process? In this context, this study provides a critical linkage between empathy and performance, recognizing if these qualities are not connected, commitments and resources dedicated to having empathic sellers may have limited value.

In addition, by examining empathy this research helps fulfill the call for research on other competencies related to political skill (Maher et al., 2022). In doing so, this research seeks to determine if political skill enhances or reduces the relationship between salespeople’s empathy and value enhancing behavior performance. Moreover, this research extends the knowledge of political skill beyond previous research that only focused on intra-organizational skills (Gansen-Ammann et al., 2019; Bolander & Richards, 2018). This is important because it allows managers and academics to better comprehend if empathy “stands by itself” in customer interactions, or if it can be enhanced through merging other available seller skills (i.e., political skill).

The paper begins by exploring the theoretical underpinnings for the proposed hypotheses and then examines the literature addressing political skill and empathy. Particular attention is directed to applications and extensions in the
sales setting followed by hypotheses that support the proposed model. The discussion then describes the research methodology followed by managerial and research implications.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The model proposed in this study integrates a range of conceptual domains, including empathy, political skill based on social influence, and value enhancing performance behaviors. The notion of empathy in business has been recognized and was found to be a critical trait of successful salespeople because of its ability to assist communications, information processing, and interpersonal compatibilities (Bagozzi, 2006). As an example of empathy, consider the salesperson who understands and applies past customer situations to a different (i.e., new) client. These past experiences provide the seller the ability, knowledge, and insight to demonstrate and communicate to the new buyer an understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced in a buying situation. Simply, buyers often desire sellers who understand their needs and can translate their needs into a mutually beneficial outcome (Ahearne et al., 2007). Being able to understand the customer’s situation from their perspective provides the seller with an important perspective that can benefit buyers and sellers. Despite Bagozzi’s (2006) call for further research, empathy remains underexplored in the B2B sales literature.

Embracing customer needs (Treen & Yu, 2022) and transforming empathy into a positive force is particularly valuable in business markets (Comer & Drollinger, 1999). These relational based and empathetic behaviors can include support, encouragement, and assistance (e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1985) and are useful during difficult periods as well as for just maintaining everyday client interactions (Czaplewski et al., 2002).

Empathy has been shown to lead to sales performance in different ways. For example, Ahearn et al. (2007) suggest that empathy leads to trust, while Iglesias et al. (2019) suggest that bank employee’s empathy enhances the connection between sensory brand experience and both customer satisfaction and affective commitment. This implies multiple pathways that could exist. Trust implies a personal connection between the salesperson and customer. Customer satisfaction implies a better connection between customer needs and the product being sold. Affective commitment is more of an emotional connection between the customer and the brand. Anaza et al. (2018) showed how empathy fosters desirable sales behaviors (listening and adaptive selling behaviors) that subsequently enhance in-role performance which includes primary tasks, such as customer service, prospecting, problem-solving, sales presentations and account management (Young & Albaum, 2003). All of these are viable ways by which empathy could improve various measures of sales performance.

Evolving from social influence theory (for reviews, see Maher et al., 2022; Ferris et al., 2002; Higgins et al., 2003), political skill suggests behaviors that facilitate a give-and-take in relationships. Focusing on behaviors, attitudes, etc. coupled with processes and antecedents or precursors, social influence theory (Treadway et al., 2013) is believed to support the ability to persuade.

Specifically, political skill represents a prognostic, forward capability that involves multiple applications, situations, and contexts (e.g., Schwenker & Good, 2021). Customer relationships involve complicated interactions, (e.g., assisting, recommending, and sharing experiences) with buyers. Using social influence through political skill to help shape and recommend client decisions offers one path to procure buyer and seller benefits and positive outcomes. For instance, if a customer has periods when they lack sufficient inventory, and the seller can use social influence (past experiences in similar situations) to change product quantity orders, both parties gain from this interaction. Applying political skill as a social influence strategy suggests therefore opportunities to enhance mutually beneficial decisions (Munyon et al., 2021). The social influence (political skill) must be focused on providing benefits to help buyers reach their goals.

Prior scholarly research suggests sellers improve performance when they perform customer-influenced behaviors (Palmatier et al., 2006). As a consequence, individuals with political skill who engage in influence techniques are predicted to escalate behaviors with clients in a variety of rewarding interactions to enhance customer value by taking personal accountability, understanding their customer’s business, advocating for them within the seller's company, offering applications for their products/services, being easily accessible, solving customer problems quickly, and acting innovatively.
For example, salespeople with higher political skill will likely have higher levels of social competencies including interpersonal influence, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and networking ability (Ferris, et al., 2005a) not available to those with lower political skill, enabling such salespeople to influence aspects needed to express their level of empathy or understanding of a client’s unique needs and close sales more readily. Thus, political skill should provide salespeople with the ability to influence participants to facilitate sales exchanges (Bolander et al., 2015; Verbeke et al., 2011), with expected related desirable salesperson performance behaviors.

This study expands on previous research on political skill (Frieder & Basik, 2017) and addresses the notion that salespeople who are politically skilled are able to transform this quality into increased performance beyond the benefits of using empathy alone. As reflected in the model in Figure 1, this paper proposes that empathy both directly and indirectly via political skill impacts salespeople’s value enhancing behavior performance creating a synergistic role in the success of the salesperson.

**Figure 1. Hypothesized Model of Empathy and Political Skill on Value Enhancing Behavior Performance**

**Empathy and Value Enhancing Behavior Performance**

Connections with customers provided through empathy are realized when empathy is applied to help one understand others’ actions, feelings, and thoughts (Bernstein & Davis, 1982; Brems, 1989). This may translate into enhancing buyer needs (Bagozzi et al., 2012; Widmier, 2002). Empathetic individuals demonstrate helping (Agnihotri, et al., 2012; cf. Widmier, 2002), prosocial (Pang et al., 2022; Bagozzi & Moore, 1994), and ethical behaviors (Agnihotri & Krush, 2015), and are inclined to be better listeners (Comer & Drollinger, 1999) and not surprisingly seem to support customer oriented selling (Bagozzi et al., 2012; Widmier, 2002). Research on industrial salespeople finds salespeople demonstrating empathy are perceived as better listeners and are more adaptive in their selling behaviors, both of which lead to increases in expected and discretionary sales performance (Anaza et al., 2018).

Sales performance can be measured subjectively and objectively (Kerr & Marcos-Cuevas, 2022), but our focus is on subjective behavioral sales performance. Originating in HR Chally’s years of studying business customers (2006), this study examines world-class sales behaviors and identify them as value enhancing behavior performance. These behaviors include personalizing customer results, understanding customers’ business, and attempting to solve problems to meet customer needs.

There are multiple paths for empathy to impact sales, just as for example fact finding with customers impacts a number of outcomes (relationships, confidence in the buyer, communication styles, etc.). However the importance to this link (empathy to performance) is significant because contemporary sellers are regularly coached and trained through
various formats (for instance, customer meetings) to demonstrate they are “on track” in understanding client needs. It is important therefore to expand the connection so the seller understands they directly and personally benefit by making this connection with the customer.

Because salespeople who are empathic assume the viewpoint of others, they are better positioned to comprehend and address the needs of customers (Bagozzi et al., 2012; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997; Widmier, 2002). By applying empathy to understand customer needs, it follows that a better understanding will result in increased value enhancing behaviors. For example, empathetic sellers are more likely to take accountability for customers’ desired results. They may discern these customer views from typical sales techniques such as meeting with customers, researching their needs, asking appropriate questions, allowing them to discuss their problems, using active listening, summarizing and clarifying with them their understanding of problems, and presenting a relevant sales solution to increase the odds of completing a sale.

By understanding the customer’s needs, the seller is better equipped to fully understand a customer’s business, act as an advocate for the customer, and explain special needs in production, delivery, installation, etc. to other internal parties. This understanding can enable salespeople to effectively address customer issues and innovate in responding to their needs. Therefore, it is suggested

**H1:** There is a positive relationship between a salesperson’s empathy and their value enhancing behavior performance.

**Political Skill as a Mediator**

Successful business professionals require persuasive skills potentially applied with political skill (Ferris et al., 2005a). The goal is to encourage individuals to exhibit behaviors that benefit both buyers and sellers (Ahearn et al., 2004). Gansen-Ammann et al. (2019) suggest that political skill occurs when an individual applies interpersonal skills to influence others. Empathy would appear to be a potentially important ability to display given its positive relationship to fostering interpersonal relationships (Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003).

Political skill allows the persuader (e.g., salesperson) to act in a fashion that sways the receiver (e.g., buyer) to perceive issues as the persuader intends. That is the influencer seeks to communicate to the receiver the same thought process (e.g., urgency, decision on choices) as the sender. Consequently, empathy enables or facilitates communication, interpersonal compatibility, and information processing (Bagozzi, 2006). Hence, salespeople high in empathy are better positioned to use political skill to persuade and shape others by interpreting interactions of others, recognizing critical influencers, building coalitions, and managing any problems or conflicts (Ferris et al., 2005b).

Salespeople often face obstacles in customer exchanges, and empathy may assist the seller in understanding the issue from the buyer’s view. For example, discovering early that a buyer does not match with a specific product allows the seller to counsel a buyer to a better solution. Customers who may be less receptive to a sales approach may deescalate when approached with understanding and respect. Salespeople who empathize by understanding customers’ pain points and then create acceptable solutions make customers’ lives easier. In turn, this potential antecedent offers ties with other traits, one of which is political skill.

Political skill and intrinsic motivation have gained significant attention in sales research, as they are key influencers of outcomes or performance (Kimura et al., 2019). Salespeople can influence individuals through political skill by demonstrating empathy and conveying positive influence. Successful influencers decide on behaviors consistent with improved performance and execute them effectively (Treadway et al., 2013). This research proposes empathetic sellers are more proficient in prompting others by using political skill.

Empathy matters in B2B sales exchanges because understanding business needs from the customer’s viewpoint through sincere interest and caring attitudes (i.e., being empathetic) facilitates the four dimensions of political skill (i.e., social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and apparent sincerity, Ferris, et al., 2005a) which are critical in successfully advocating for customers and meeting their needs. Political skill was chosen for this study because its application enhances the understanding of others, which can then be applied to provide influence and
direction. The B2B sales setting therefore, where sellers seek to guide buyers to improved outcomes, provides an ideal environment to test this application.

Salespeople with a better understanding of customers (i.e., who are more empathetic) may be more capable of expressing that knowledge via social astuteness by observing others, and interpreting interactions between and with other people. Actively scanning their environment, persons with higher political skill have been shown to adjust behaviors to meet circumstances (McAllister, Ellen, & Ferris 2018). This enables them to understand customers and adjust the sales message for specific situations. Hence sellers using political skill can translate this into a rewarding tool to enhance the effect of empathy on value enhancing behavior performance. Although not the specific focus of their research, a study of employees in Germany found a statistically significant positive correlation between empathy and social astuteness, further supporting this relationship (Blickle et al. 2009). Empathetic salespeople are expected to produce favorable customer responses when they demonstrate their potent ability to influence others to enhance both parties’ goals. Social capital in the form of higher trust works as a resource applied as interpersonal influence (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Research suggests that empathy can increase liking and help establish positive rapport (Norfolk, Birdi & Walsh 2007; Yabar & Hess 2007), both aspects of interpersonal influence.

A salesperson who has empathy for customers may enhance their deeper understanding through their ability to network. They are able to recognize and make connections with key counterparts. The building of alliances and bonds within an organization may provide access to more information, and recognition of opportunities (McAllister, Ellen, & Ferris 2018) as well as the ability to express their empathy to others in the buying organization. By putting oneself in another’s shoes, empathy fosters communication and trust, which leads to stronger bonds. Empathy has been found to help leaders create closer relationships with employees (Rahman 2016), suggesting its importance in assisting one in networking (i.e., connecting and building relationships with others).

Having a caring attitude and sincere interest in a customer are empathetic characteristics that may be enhanced by apparent sincerity. This is supported by the expression of high levels of integrity, authenticity, and genuineness, to discourage a salesperson from appearing to be empathetic while actually being deceitful. Salespeople with this aspect of political skill inspire confidence and trust because their actions are not seen as coercive or manipulative (Ferris et al. 2007). Research suggests that empathy can influence perceptions of sincerity. Research finds that when employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups perceive their leaders as being empathetic they are more likely to believe their organization’s racial equity policies to be genuine (Van Bommel, Robotham, Jackson & Zimmermann 2022).

Interpersonal traits in sellers can help them understand others and influence their actions, leading to more effective solutions according to two recent studies (Schwepker & Good, 2021; Good & Schwepker, 2022b). The first study shows political skill precedes three outcomes: sales performance, customer-oriented selling, and relationship-building competence (Good & Schwepker, 2022b). The second study shows political skill also reduces customer-driven deviance (Schwepker & Good, 2021). The question in this study is if political skill mediates the relationship between empathy and performance behaviors deemed important to buyers.

Salespeople who possess political skill demonstrate persuasion, shaping others, observing interactions, recognizing key influencers, and building alliances. Can these skills enhance a seller’s empathy to result in higher outcomes than would be experienced without political skill? Salespeople who understand political participants in buying decisions likely are more accessible. Salespeople with political skill expertise likely are more prone to propose targeted solutions, highlighting the significant positive impact of seller expertise and communication on customer relationships.

While the perception of being more empathetic is important, a question remains. Is political skill the mechanism through which empathy decreases or increases one’s value enhancing behavior performance such as focusing on customers’ results, advocating for them, or solving their problems?

Previous research suggests that empathy is positively related to political skill, which is positively related to sales performance. Furthermore, although the question of whether engaging in political skill mediates the relationship between empathy and value enhancing behavior performance has not been answered, research suggests such a relationship exists. Therefore it is suggested that
H2a: There is a positive relationship between a salesperson’s empathy and their political skill.

H2b: There is a positive relationship between a salesperson’s political skill and their value enhancing behavior performance.

H2c: Political skill mediates the relationship between a salesperson’s empathy and their value enhancing behavior performance.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The study used survey data from a more comprehensive collection of data examining other salesperson characteristics and outcomes (Schwepker & Good, 2021; Good & Schwepker, 2022b). The final sample was 240 salespeople after removing 54 respondents who were not employed as full-time salespeople, did not complete the survey, or did not pass the attention check. This study examines three constructs from this data collection. A time-trend extrapolation test, in which early and late responders are compared across study variables, found no statistically significant differences (F = 1.16, significance of F = 0.06), indicating little concern for nonresponse bias (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

The sample is predominantly female (52.5%) and unmarried (52.9%), with a median income of $55,000 and a fixed to variable income ratio of 59.6%. Most have a bachelor's degree (32.1%), 13.8% have a graduate degree, 13.8% have a two-year degree, and 23.3% have some college education. The average age is 39.1 years, with 11 years of sales experience.

Operationalization of Study Variables

The study applied previously validated seven-point scales to measure empathy (3 items using strongly disagree to strongly agree) (Ahearne et al., 2007), political skill (12 items strongly disagree to strongly agree) (Bolander et al., 2015, p. 9), and value enhancing behavior performance (7 items much worse to much better) (Schwepker & Good, 2012). Although our performance measure is self-reported, research by Churchill et al. (1985) and Schneider et al. (1996) supports a positive correlation between self-report performance measures and objective performance evaluations made by observers. Given that total years of sales experience (EXP) previously has been found to affect sales performance (Churchill et al. 1985), it served as a control variable when analyzing salesperson value enhancing sales performance.

Measure Assessment

Table 1 provides statistics for each measurement construct. Coefficient alphas above .70 suggest the scales are reliable (Nunnally, 1978).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EMP</th>
<th>PS</th>
<th>VEBP</th>
<th>EXP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>11.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand Dev</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>8.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. **significant at p ≤ .01; *significant at p ≤ .05; reliabilities along the diagonal; n/a = not applicable; EMP = Empathy; PS = political skill; VEBP = Value Enhancing Behavior Performance; EXP = total years of sales experience
The validity of the measures was verified using AMOS 25, with significant parameter estimates (see Table 2) indicating convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeds the suggested critical value of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), further supporting the validity of the measures.

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results: Factor Loadings and T-Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy</strong> (Ahearne et al., 2007)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= strongly disagree 7 = strongly agree)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP1 I always demonstrate a sincere interest in people.</td>
<td>.806</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP2 I display a caring attitude toward others.</td>
<td>.870</td>
<td>14.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP3 I am always ready to help when others encounter problems.</td>
<td>.847</td>
<td>14.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Skill</strong> (Bolander et al., 2015; Ferris et al., 2005b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= strongly disagree 7 = strongly agree)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Astuteness</td>
<td>.932</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA1 I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others.</td>
<td>.691</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA2 I understand people very well.</td>
<td>.861</td>
<td>12.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA3 I have good intuition or “savvy” about how to present myself to others.</td>
<td>.876</td>
<td>12.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Influence</td>
<td>.992</td>
<td>10.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II1 I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others.</td>
<td>.810</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II2 I am good at getting people to like me.</td>
<td>.872</td>
<td>16.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II3 It is easy for me to develop a good rapport with most people.</td>
<td>.841</td>
<td>15.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking Ability</td>
<td>.938</td>
<td>11.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA1 I am good at building relationships with influential people at work.</td>
<td>.874</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA2 I am good at using my connections and networking to make things happen at work.</td>
<td>.915</td>
<td>20.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA3 I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others.</td>
<td>.854</td>
<td>17.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparent Sincerity</td>
<td>.861</td>
<td>10.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS1 I try to show a genuine interest in other people.</td>
<td>.857</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS2 It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do.</td>
<td>.846</td>
<td>16.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS3 When communicating with others, I try to be genuine in what I say and do.</td>
<td>.878</td>
<td>17.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value Enhancing Behavior</strong> (Schwepker &amp; Good, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate your current level of performance relative to other salespeople in your organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = much worse 7 = much better)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEBP1 Taking personal accountability for my customers’ desired results.</td>
<td>.639</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEBP2 Fully understanding my customers’ business.</td>
<td>.776</td>
<td>10.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEBP3 Acting as an advocate for my customers within my company.</td>
<td>.691</td>
<td>9.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEBP4 Providing customers with applications for the products/services my company sells.</td>
<td>.745</td>
<td>10.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEBP5 Being easily accessible to my customers.</td>
<td>.792</td>
<td>10.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEBP6 Quickly and effectively solving customer problems.</td>
<td>.781</td>
<td>10.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEBP7 Acting innovatively in responding to customer needs.</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>10.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *The average variance extracted for each construct is in parentheses; VEBP = Value Enhancing Behavior

* constrained to 1.0; p < 0.001 for each factor loading; CFI = .93, NFI = .89, SRMR = .05, \( \chi^2 = 506.48 \), df = 202, p = .000

Table 3 provides evidence of discriminant validity where the average variance extracted for each measurement construct is larger than its shared variance with every other study construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) except for VEBP, whose shared variance with empathy is slightly larger (.58) than the average variance extracted for VEBP (.57). To confirm the discriminant validity between Empathy and VEBP, a chi-square difference test was conducted whereby two models, each with Empathy and VEBP, were estimated. Model one constrained the estimated correlation parameter between these constructs to 1.0, while model two had no such constraint. The two models were then compared to determine if they were statistically significantly different (Joreskog, 1971). The chi-square value is
statistically significantly lower for the unconstrained model ($\chi^2 = 142.05, df = 34$) than for the constrained model ($\chi^2 = 158.23, df = 35$) suggesting discriminant validity exists (Bagozzi & Phillips, 1982). Further evidence of discriminant validity comes from the correlations between each pair of study constructs not containing the value of 1.0 at a 95 percent confidence interval (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

### Table 3. Discriminant Validity: Average Variance Extracted, Shared Variance, Confidence Interval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Shared Variance</th>
<th>Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empathy (.708)* $\leftrightarrow$ VEBP (.569)</td>
<td>.582</td>
<td>.418 to .746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy $\leftrightarrow$ Political Skill (.722)</td>
<td>.279</td>
<td>.103 to .455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Skill $\leftrightarrow$ VEBP</td>
<td>.548</td>
<td>.156 to .444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The average variance extracted for each construct is in parentheses.

To test for multicollinearity, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was evaluated for each construct in our model. With the highest VIF at 2.04 ($R^2 = .51$) for VEBP, which is less than the suggested cutoff value of 5.0, there appears to be no problem with multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2019).

Numerous steps were taken to limit common method variance. First, the questionnaire did not include bipolar numerical scales or ambiguous scale items and measurement constructs were separated. Furthermore, respondents were told there were no right or wrong answers and were promised anonymity (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, a principal components factor analysis was conducted. If the highest eigenvalue is less than 40% of the variance explained (ours was 35.6%), then common method variance is not considered a problem (Fuller et al. 2016). Third, the poor fit statistics achieved ($\chi^2 = 1,788.58, df = 276, p = .000, CFI = .64, NFI = .60, SRMR = .14$) when allowing all the measurement scale variables to load on a single factor using confirmatory factor analysis suggests that common method variance is not a problem (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Despite evidence suggesting common method variance is not an issue a technique advocated to control for possible common method variance was used. When estimating the structural model, each indicator was allowed to load on a latent common factor enabling the response variance to be partitioned into trait, method, and random error (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This method has been employed by studies utilizing self-report measures (e.g., Jaramillo et al., 2009; MacKenzie et al., 2001; McFarland & Dixon, 2019; Schwepker & Good, 2017).

### ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Structural equation modeling with AMOS 25 was used to test the study’s hypotheses. Salesperson experience (EXP) was included in the model as a control variable. Mediation was tested by using a bootstrapping technique that assesses indirect effects by continually sampling from the data set (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

The model adequately fits the data as demonstrated by the fit statistics in Table 4 (see Hair et al., 2019 for suggested fit statistics). Empathy is significantly positively related to value enhancing behavior performance as expected in H1 (beta = .619, $p < .001$). Empathetically skilled salespeople appear to be stronger in value enhancing behavior performance. Hypothesis 2a proposing a positive relationship between empathy and political skill (beta = .528, $p < .001$) is supported. Thus it appears that salespeople more skilled in empathizing are likely to be more politically skilled. As anticipated in H2b, political skill also is positively associated with value enhancing behavior performance (beta = .226, $p < .001$). This suggests that politically skilled salespeople are adept at providing more value for their customers. In terms of mediation (H2c), political skill partially mediates the relationship between salesperson empathy and value enhancing behavior performance with a significant indirect effect (beta = .119, $p = .001$). Finally, years of sales experience is not related to value enhancing behavior performance in our model.

### Table 4. Final Path Model - Standardized Structural Parameter Estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empathy→ VEBP</td>
<td>H₁ (+) accept</td>
<td>.619***</td>
<td>.586</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Empathy → Political Skill
Political Skill → VEBP
Mediator Effect Political Skill
EXP → VEBP

Goodness-of-fit Statistics:
\[ \chi^2 = 422.73 \]
df = 203, p = .000
CFI = .95
NFI = .91
TLI = .94
RMSEA = .07
SRMR = .05

Note. ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05
EXP = total years of sales experience; VEBP = Value Enhancing Behavior Performance

DISCUSSION

Empathy and political skill are relatively unexplored in the context of business-to-business selling. Despite the ability to empathize is an important salesperson characteristic, its impact on sales performance has received limited attention (Karla et al., 2023; Agnihotri & Krush, 2015) and its relationship to political skill is virtually unknown. The results of this study suggest that salespeople who are skilled in empathizing are better equipped to navigate complex relationships, demonstrate sincerity, build friendships, and network effectively. Empathy enables communication, interpersonal compatibility, and information processing. Additionally, political skill enhances certain desired customer behaviors, which have received only limited attention (Kalra et al., 2017). By utilizing their political skill, salespeople can improve customer outcomes and enhance their performance. The study underscores the importance of both empathy and political skill in enhancing salesperson performance as described by their ability to manage results, understand business, offer products, and advocate for and solve problems with customer needs in mind (all characteristics of value enhancing behavior performance).

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The model and hypotheses examined in this study provide important contributions to the sales literature. Existing literature suggests the importance of empathy in sales (Mayer & Greenberg, 2006) and empathy as part of the customer orientation-loyalty connection (Gerlach et al., 2016). Moreover, political skill has been identified as an important aspect of sales (Delpechitre et al., 2019; Kimura et al., 2019; Nadella, 2017). However, the literature did not provide a method for demonstrating empathy, which this study proposes and finds is through political skill.

Recent work shows political skill precedes three outcomes: sales performance (measured as outcomes from the sales process), customer-oriented selling, and relationship-building competence (Good & Schwepker, 2022b). A second study shows it also reduces customer-driven deviance (Schwepker & Good, 2021). The current study extends this work to provide evidence that when salespeople have customer empathy, political skill accentuates the relationship between empathy and performance, specifically with behaviors that have been viewed as important to buyers.

The study reveals a positive correlation and logically follows that empathy leads to enhanced behavior performance in salespeople. Further, this work extends previous research by assessing political skill simultaneously with empathy to demonstrate the pair leads to increased performance-related goals above any benefit derived from empathy alone.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study offers important implications impacting buyers and sellers. Empathy and political skill are beneficial for industrial salespeople as empathetic individuals understand customers and adjust their goals, impacting performance outcomes. Hence, while these skills can be employed in multiple situations (e.g., salesperson/manager interaction, hiring, training, and coaching), enriching the performance sellers provide to buyers is a critical outcome of political skill and empathy working together.
Significantly, empathy does not need to operate as a sole contributor to performance. Its impact on performance can be enhanced through political skill. The study found those with greater empathy skills are more politically skilled and that political skill mediates the relationship between empathy and value enhancing behavior performance. Therefore, sales organizations may utilize the scales used in this study to aid practitioners in recognizing empathetic sellers. They may then take actions to develop and strengthen salespeople’s empathy. One way to improve empathy is to learn how to understand and emotionally connect with others. This can be achieved for example by asking more questions of others and carefully listening to their responses (Gillette, 2022), both of which can be taught to salespeople. This includes teaching sellers how to translate buyer answers into responses (actions, communications, etc.) that the buyer recognizes are responses to their specific needs. It is insufficient to assume buyers comprehend sellers who have empathy are operating on their behalf. Sellers must communicate the advantages of using such behaviors.

The latter may be expressed through the political skill of salespeople, whose current levels may be assessed using the political skill inventory. Training can be provided in the political skill dimensions. Social astuteness can be improved by teaching proper interaction, networking skills can be enhanced by using social capital, and negotiation and conflict management skills can be improved to become better networkers. Managers and selling organizations should help sellers transcend understanding political skill, to using it to benefit the buyer, which translates into higher seller performance.

LIMITATIONS & SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study offers a number of contributions, but several limitations may be considered which lead to directions for future research. First, our measures are self-reported. Salespeople may be inaccurate in their assessment of their empathy, political skill and performance. This is often the nature of such research. Our lack of access to objective performance measures led us to rely on a subjective measure of salespeople’s performance which has been deemed a good proxy for objective sales performance in surveys (Schneider et al., 1996). Second, survey research depends upon the honesty of respondents. To help alleviate this concern, anonymity was provided, which is suggested for addressing respondent honesty (Randall & Fernandes, 1991). Participants completed the survey online and thus could not be identified, providing them little incentive for responding dishonestly. Third, our data is cross-sectional. While the literature supports our hypotheses, obtaining access to salespeople individually or in buyer-seller dyads would add support for causality of the model. A longitudinal data collection would help corroborate our findings in determining if these skills can be enhanced over time. An experimental design could be implemented to test the causality of the proposed relationships. Fourth, political skill as the mechanism by which empathy leads to value enhancing behaviors offers promising future research into types of environments (industries, size of accounts, etc.) in which empathetic salespeople might be able to better leverage political skill to drive sales.

The study aims to explore the characteristics of specific salespeople, their inclination towards empathy, political skill, and value enhancing behaviors, and if these behaviors can be influenced in sales contexts, to better understand their effectiveness. Further investigations in sales contexts may help address such questions. For example, future research may expand the model to include additional antecedents and consequences that may provide additional insight. Extensions of this work could explore the impact of cultural differences on the effectiveness of empathy and political skill in sales contexts. For instance, Hofstede (2001) and Hofstede et al. (2010) uncovered several key cultural values that influence business and consumer behavior such as self-orientation (Individualism/Collective Index), authority orientation (Power Distance Index), risk orientation (Uncertainty-Avoidance Index), assertiveness and achievement orientation (Masculinity/Femininity Index) and long-term orientation. Do such values, which vary across countries, have differential impacts on the interrelationships between empathy, political skill and performance among salespeople?

The current study might be extended by exploring its variables’ relationships with “interpersonal mentalizing” (Singer and Fehr 2005). Interpersonal mentalizing is an automatic or reflexive brain process that involves deducing another person’s beliefs, desires, risk preferences, intentions, and other mental states or events, as well as the ability to process subtle cues and adjust desires accordingly (e.g., Frith & Frith 2003, p. 80). Interpersonal mentalizing has been positively linked to perspective taking, one aspect of empathy (Dietvorst et al., 2009). Are salespeople who are high
in interpersonal mentalizing more empathetic and consequently better at using political skill to affect value enhancing sales behaviors?

Another possibility for extending the current study includes breaking empathy into its constituent parts of cognitive, emotive, and empathic empathy (Pang, 2022). These researchers examined the mediating effects of gratitude among different types of empathy (perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress) and prosocial behavior and prove a better understanding between empathy and prosocial behavior such as helping, cooperating, sharing and comforting in social interactions. For example, their finding that the indirect effect of personal distress empathy on prosocial behavior is negative, suggests that the effect of empathy to relieve their own discomfort may similarly result in less value enhancing behavior performance (as with prosocial behavior) depending on the influence of political skill.

To help establish causality, obtaining permission to collect actual company data or develop experiments with salespeople may be utilized in future studies. Having this access would be interesting to determine how and when these traits relate when applied longitudinally. Assessing levels of empathy and political skill as applied early in a relationship compared to later periods might also confirm research theories of types of intervention to improve these traits. Examining additional demographic variables in relationship to this study’s constructs may prove fruitful, particularly in a moderating sense. Although age was not significantly correlated with empathy or political skill in our study, future research may want to consider the complex role it and other demographic variables might play. In a study of primarily female (86%) university employees, Toomey et al. (2021) found that among older employees, the relationship between empathetic concern and deep acting (i.e., expressing genuine emotion) is stronger among relatively older and more politically skilled employees, while lower levels of political skill enhance the relationship between empathetic concern and deep acting among relatively younger employees. Finally, further research when available with the same seller and buyer dyads would extend this research stream.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to assess a model of salespeople’s empathy, political skill, and value enhancing behavior performance. Empathy was found to enhance performance directly and indirectly through political skill. These results contribute to our understanding of sales performance. Given that salesperson performance may be enhanced by improving salespeople’s empathy and political skill suggests that these skills be given added attention when recruiting and training salespeople. Future research should assess these and other antecedents and outcomes, which will help sales organizations gain insight into where best to place their time, money, and effort.

REFERENCES


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