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Office Politics: Training Ground for Adaptive Sellers
Takuma Kimura, PhD, Belén Bande, PhD, and Pilar Fernández-Ferrín, PhD

Excellent salespeople are not bound to a script. That makes an excellent robot. Instead, excellent salespeople can adapt their sales approaches to meet customers’ needs and make quality recommendations. They can sense what a customer truly wants before the customer is able to put it into words. Excellent salespeople can uncover desires concerning which customers were unaware and present solutions that fulfill those desires. They can turn anxiety into expectancy. They turn fear into excitement. Adaptive selling is the goal.

Our study builds on other studies that established the positive effects of adaptive selling on sales performance.1 To examine the effects and the interactions between adaptive selling, political skill, and intrinsic motivation, we sampled 249 matched supervisor-salesperson pairs consisting of 145 supervisors and 249 salespersons and applied a three-dimensional measure of sales performance.2 Supervisors measured salespeople by individual task proficiency, individual task adaptivity, and individual task proactivity. Although much research has been focused on a salesperson’s externally directed behavior, we found that both political skill and intrinsic motivation have moderating effects on adaptive selling and, derivatively, sales performance. In other words, intraorganizational skills are also important for successful adaptive selling. In light of this evidence, we recommend that every sales manager assist his/her salespeople with developing intrapreneurial abilities—i.e. intraorganizational political skills and intrinsic motivation.

Politics Makes Perfect

While some evidence shows that adaptive selling techniques improve sales performance, much of the evidence is still inconsistent. One study found that adaptive selling was positively related to an individual salesperson’s subjective performance and his/her sales data.3 However, another study found that there is an insignificant relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance.4 Many studies focus on the relationship between externally directed (i.e. customer-directed) activities and sales performance, but few studies have focused on internally directed (i.e. office politics) activities on sales performance.

Politically skilled salespeople have the ability to understand others and use this understanding to exert influence on others. They can develop useful personal networks that provide resources for
work-related tasks. They also experience better self-understanding and can effectively interpret social cues from others. This helps them navigate office relationships with coworkers and managers as well as improve customer interactions.

**Motivation from the Inside Out**

Our findings show that adaptive selling has a positive effect on salespeople’s task proficiency, task adaptivity, and task proactivity. However, our results also show that the positive relationship between adaptive selling and these positive outcomes is contingent on political skill for both task adaptivity and task proactivity. We also found a positive relationship between adaptive selling and individual task proficiency when intrinsic motivation was high but not when motivation was low. What this finding implies is that political skill only enhances the positive effects of adaptive selling on task proficiency when salespeople are highly motivated to improve task proficiency. For those with low motivation, political skill reduced the positive effect of motivation on task proficiency, suggesting that some salespeople are more reliant on political skills to manage perceptions of success than on actual performance.

If salespeople can communicate sincerity to their colleagues, they can also elicit trust from both managers and customers. Therefore, salespeople who can practice their political skills in the office are more likely to get the foundational resources they need from managers, enabling salespeople to see better results in the field.

Our study found that salespersons high in political skill had particular aptitude for task adaptivity and task proactivity, but not necessarily for task proficiency. A possible explanation for this is that salespersons with high political skill can adapt well when they are required to, but they may lack the motivation for proficient and proactive sales behaviors. Political behavior is discretionary, so some politically skilled individuals do not engage in political activity. They must have political will to do so. Since all three metrics are needed to determine sales performance, we suggest that a second moderator of adaptive selling is intrinsic motivation.

Self-motivated individuals are dedicated to excellent performance. When individuals perceive the personal benefits of political engagement in the office, those that are self-motivated are more likely to involve themselves in exercising political skill geared toward improving performance. Political engagement is a self-determination activity. Self-determination theory posits that a high level of intrinsic motivation increases an individual’s adaptive abilities. In general, those that are high in political skill experience higher levels of task proficiency, task proactivity, and task adaptivity. However, in our study, self-motivated salespersons with political skills used intraorganizationally were able to improve their use of adaptive selling techniques the most. They were the top performers. When considering new salespeople for your team, it might be best to hire for motivation and train for political skill.
The Training Grounds

Managers need to educate their salespeople about the benefits of engagement in adaptive behavior and political skill inside the organization. We recommend that the onboarding process for new salespeople include training for building personal networks within your organization to find information and resources that are valuable for sales activity. Do not limit all training to customer-related skills. Train your people to connect and integrate with other organizational members at all levels. Lecture-style training is not recommended; instead, utilize experiential training. This is the training ground for selling in the field, so replicate the scenario as closely as possible. Others have suggested that is an effective way to train political skill. We find this to be a good supplement for experiential learning in the office. Pair your top performers with those who could benefit from personal coaching. This can be a reminder of the importance of political skill training after the onboarding process is complete.

Real estate transactions are complex. For most customers, their home is the largest purchase of their lifetime. Agents meet multiple times at different locations for one sale that may take months to complete. Customers will want to know as much as they can about a home, and priorities will shift as they learn more about themselves during the home-buying process. Salespeople with excellent adaptive selling skills thrive in a complex sales environment. Good agents truly understand their customers. Good agents are self-motivated, politically-skilled salespeople. If you are a manager in a real-estate brokerage who wants better sales, consider some political training before that next company Christmas party.

Recommended Reading


References


**About the Authors**

**Takuma Kimura, PhD**  
*Professor of Organizational Behavior, Hosei University*  
Dr. Takuma Kimura’s (PhD – University of Tokyo) research interests include organizational politics, political skill, and ethical leadership. He teaches courses in business and management studies and received the Top Reviewer Award in multidisciplinary research from Publons. He has been published in the *Journal of Cleaner Production, Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management, Industrial Marketing Management, European Management Journal*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*, among others.

**Belén Bande, PhD**  
*Associate Professor of Marketing, University of Navarra*  
Dr. Belén Bande’s (PhD – University of Santiago de Compostela) research interests include sales management, corporate social responsibility, and consumer ethnocentrism. She has been published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal*

Pilar Fernández-Ferrín, PhD
Associate Professor of Marketing, University of the Basque Country - UPV/EHU
Dr. Pilar Fernández-Ferrín’s (PhD – University of Santiago de Compostela) research interests include CSR and consumer behavior, marketing, and business administration. She was awarded the Emerald Literati Award for Excellence in 2016 and has been published in Industrial Marketing Management, Food Quality and Preference, Journal of Product Innovation Management, Journal of Cleaner Production, International Journal of Emerging Markets, and Technovation, among others.