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Effects of Emotional Exhaustion on Ethical Behavior

Bruno Lussier, PhD, Nathaniel N. Hartmann, PhD, and Willy Bolander, PhD

All sales professionals—not just real estate professionals—face temptations to behave unethically when there are deadlines and sales goals to meet. However, unethical sales behavior jeopardizes the integrity of the salesperson and the firm. Eventually, people will notice and avoid doing business with a salesperson who has a reputation for unethical tactics. Our research suggests that unethical behavior decreases overall sales performance and emotional exhaustion increases the likelihood of those unethical behaviors.

Consequently, emotional exhaustion is another factor that negatively impacts sales performance. We define emotional exhaustion as a state of depleted emotional resources for coping with job demands. Because salespeople encounter a higher-than-average number of rejections and disappointments in their work, emotional exhaustion is a very real hazard for salespeople.



Based on our survey data from 123 matched B2B salesperson-manager dyads, we conclude that ethical behaviors and perceived supervisor support can decrease emotional exhaustion. A surprising discovery is that grit—defined as a stable resource salespeople can draw upon that represents perseverance and determination to meet long-term goals—accentuates the effects of emotional exhaustion on unethical behaviors. We suggest 1) managers who are intentional about providing support and attentive to their salespersons’ emotional reserves will see better sales results and fewer unethical behaviors, 2) managers should be wary of “gritty” salespeople, and 3) ethical selling leads to better sales performance.

What Causes Unethical Behavior

Firms spend about \$20 billion annually on sales training¹, but only about 50% of salespeople in those firms meet their performance goals.² Salespeople live in a world where they always have a goal and half of them are never reaching it. This is a recipe for emotional exhaustion that leads to unethical behaviors. We define unethical behaviors as actions that are considered morally (un)acceptable to the larger group.³ Emotional exhaustion is “the feeling of being emotionally overextended by one’s work.”⁴ Sales managers might be tempted to solve the problem of unethical sales behavior by implementing strict controls on salesperson activity. However, despite technological enhancements that increase transparency, it has been shown that sales

managers still have difficulty identifying and managing the unethical behaviors of their salespeople.⁵ Since salespeople live in such goal-driven environments and income is often seasonal, emotional exhaustion is a constant danger. Negative reinforcement alone—i.e. increased supervision and consequences—are not enough to decrease unethical behaviors or increase sales performance.

Self-control is defined as “the ability of an individual to self-regulate his or her urges, behavior, or desires despite temptations and impulses.”⁶ When a person has no self-control, they tend to do what momentarily feels good. They are motivated by short-term rewards. We believe that self-control is a limited emotional resource. Once it is depleted people are unable to objectively regulate their behaviors. Salespeople are tempted to engage in unethical behaviors such as dishonesty, manipulation, and cheating when they are in an emotional state of exhaustion. The good news is individuals can replenish their emotional resources. Specifically, for our purposes, supervisors can help salespeople replenish these resources.

Perceived Supervisor Support

Prior to our study, we hypothesized that work-related social-support resources mitigate the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on ethical behaviors. Other work in this field suggests that these resources help salespeople achieve work related goals, reduce job demands, and stimulate personal development.⁷ When salespeople perceive support from their supervisors through emotional assistance (e.g. positive feedback), it can strengthen employee motivation. Coaching can also be perceived as support and can help salespeople with task fulfillment, which decreases emotional exhaustion. Salesperson perception is not the only thing influenced by support activities, though. There is evidence to suggest that if an individual has support from his/her supervisor, it is likely that the supervisor’s appraisal of the employee’s work demands will be more favorable.⁸ Strengthening the salesperson/supervisor bond attenuates the depletion of emotional resources. In this way, it is a strategy for better sales performance.

After testing our hypothesis, we found that sales managers who encourage a positive work environment by giving feedback and recognizing success witness less emotional exhaustion in their salespeople. Since emotional exhaustion often leads to unethical behaviors, it is likely that managers who employ this kind of positive reinforcement will witness fewer breaches of ethical conduct. Fewer breaches in ethical conduct results in better long-term sales performance. Since perceived supervisor support increases sales performance through the effect that emotional resources have on ethical behaviors, supervisors should not triage recipients of support activities based on the magnitude of a salesperson’s accounts/clients. Rather, supervisors should prioritize those salespeople who appear to be experiencing the most emotional exhaustion and preemptively provide support to mitigate the temptation to behave unethically.

Grit

Grit is a “stable individual resource for salespeople that is constant over time.”⁹ In theory, grit would ameliorate the effects of emotional exhaustion because these “tough” salespeople would get the job done no matter the challenge. Their superior willpower is an unlimited resource for finishing tasks and maintaining focus. Much of the psychological literature that addresses the topic of grit asserts that it is a “higher order personality variable” (what we call a resource) that enables a person to be successful.¹⁰ It seemed to us that, since “gritty” salespeople were both tenacious and passionate, they would experience less emotional exhaustion and therefore would be involved in less unethical behavior. Since they participated in less unethical behavior, we hypothesized that they would exhibit better sales performance.

Our research surprisingly revealed the opposite truth. Grit actually amplified the negative effects of emotional exhaustion on ethical behavior! We anticipated that grit would be a stable resource with which salespeople could replenish their depleted emotional resources. Instead, grit was a resource that caused salespeople to “double-down.” They persisted in their sales efforts longer than their less “gritty” peers without replenishing their emotional resources. Their involvement in unethical behaviors to meet performance goals were amplified because their “grittiness” committed them to their activities. There was no point where the prospect of unethical behavior acted as a deterrent of continued selling efforts. Our findings suggest that supervisors, contrary to popular opinion, should be wary of salespeople who exhibit overly passionate character traits. “Gritty” salespeople actually lead to worse sales performance because they often commit themselves to whatever is necessary—or what *seems* necessary in the moment—to achieve their goals. The ends justify the means.

Conclusion



Our research has shown that there is a negative association between emotional exhaustion and ethical behavior and that there is a positive association between ethical behavior and sales performance. Emotional exhaustion occurs when a salesperson’s emotional resources have been depleted. Those resources are vital for resisting temptation to behave unethically when selling a product or service to a customer. Unethical behavior may result in temporary short-term gains, but long-term sales performance—the metric that truly matters—is decreased when unethical behaviors permeate an office. The best thing sales supervisors can do is identify those

salespeople who exhibit signs of depleted emotional resources and engage them with coaching and positive reinforcement. This will increase the supervisor's perception of the salesperson's work demands and will increase the salesperson's perceptions of supervisor support. Supervisors should keep a close eye on "gritty" salespeople, because their tenacity and passion may make them susceptible to unethical selling tactics. If you want better sales performance in your office, then you must encourage ethical selling. If you want to encourage ethical selling, then you must address emotional exhaustion. If you want to address emotional exhaustions, sometimes you must step away until those resources can replenish. You need to give yourself a chance to think long-term.

Recommended Reading

Lussier, Bruno, Nathaniel N. Hartmann, and Willy Bolander (2019), "Curbing the Undesirable Effects of Emotional Exhaustion on Ethical Behaviors and Performance: A Salesperson-Manager Dyadic Approach," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1-20.

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Dr. Bruno Lussier (PhD – Grenoble University) conducts research on sales force effectiveness, relationship marketing, positive organizational behavior, and ethics. His work has been published in various academic publications, such as *Journal of Business Ethics and Industrial Marketing Management*. Prior to his academic career, Bruno had a 15-year career as a business analyst, consultant, trainer, and sales manager in several B2B firms.

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