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COMPETENCE PROFILE OF AN IDEAL LEADER IN A SELLING CENTER: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Multidisciplinary sales project teams, in the literature also referred to as selling centers, receive increasing attention in both practice and scientific community. In case, selling centers are formed, the sales associate must assume leadership responsibility for the subject matter experts involved. The challenge, however, lies in the sales associate's lack of formal authority towards these subject matter experts from other departments. This study examined the research question of which competencies sales associates should acquire in order to be accepted as a leader by selling center participants despite their lack of formal authority. For this purpose, twelve selling center participants were interviewed during semi-structured face-to-face interview sessions. The interviewees described the competencies of an ideal leader from a selling center. All interviews were evaluated by applying qualitative content analysis. In addition, a frequency analysis was carried out to evaluate the number of mentions per competence. A total of six competencies were identified which generate acceptance of leadership in selling centers. The conclusion section of this paper deals with a critical appraisal as well as with future research potential.

Keywords

Selling Centers, Leadership, Acceptance, Competencies, Sales

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, sales have become an increasingly important topic on the senior management agenda of organizations (Terho, Eggert, Haas & Ulaga, 2015) and an important aspect whenever it comes to multidisciplinary customer/supplier interactions (Jelinek & Jelinek, 2010). A particular focus is on the question of how sales can be made even more effective through the use of selling centers (Smith & Barclay, 1993).

To ensure effective use, organizations need an understanding of the social dynamics within a selling center. It is therefore important for organizations to understand how participation in a selling center can be made more attractive (Schwarzkopf, 2020) as well as how social relationships can better be successfully managed (Mullins & Pangapoulos, 2018; Spekman & Johnston, 1986). This can contribute to the reduction of conflict potential within selling centers and the increase in customer experience when working with such. The present paper builds on this increasing need, as it explores characteristics that support the acceptance of leadership within selling centers.

1.1 Research Question

The focus of this research paper is particularly on the management of social relationships within a selling center. The research question to be answered in this paper is: which competencies generate acceptance of a salesperson as a leader by selling center participants? Therefore, this study is designed as exploratory research, which is predestined for a qualitative research approach (Mansourian, 2008). To answer this research question, a qualitative cross-sectional study was carried out with a sample consisting of twelve interview participants.

Knowing these competencies enables sales employees to work on their competence profile in such a way that they can positively influence the chance of being accepted as a leader in selling centers. Furthermore, external providers such as trainers, coaches, or HR developers can also benefit from the results of this study when creating competence programs for sales employees responsible for selling centers.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

A selling center consists of a group of people within an organization who take part in a sales project (Johnston & Marshall, 2013). As selling centers are intended to form analogies to buying centers (Heilmann, 2006), these people should represent an analogy of the people on the purchasing side as precisely as possible (Kothandaraman, Agnihotri & Anderson, 2011). When creating selling

centers, salespersons can use resources from different departments that a salesperson as a single employee would lack (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

As a project manager, the salesperson who acquires the respective customer usually takes over the management of a selling center (Ingram, LaForge, Schwepker & Williams, 2012). This salesperson has the challenge of ensuring that the participants in a selling center participate appropriately despite their tasks from the regular operating business (Grote, 2012). However, the salesperson is not superior to these selling center participants. In other words, the salesperson has to assume leadership responsibility without having any formal authority or position power over the participants involved.

In order to understand how a salesperson without formal authority is accepted in a leadership role, the implicit leadership theory can provide explanations. The implicit leadership theory is about the ideal image of leadership (Zabala, Corpus & Cabico, 2019). It states that people usually have implicit ideas about what characteristics a leader has (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). There is usually an idealized mental picture of a leader, which is also referred to as the prototype of leadership (Khoarakian & Sharifirad, 2018; Tavares, Sobral, Goldszmidt & Araújo, 2018). However, this idealized image of a leader changes depending on the leadership context (Liu, Ayman & Ayman-Nolley). This means that an ideal leader within a selling center can differ from an ideal leader within an accounting department. The more a person corresponds to the implicit ideas of an ideal leader, the more likely it will be accepted as a leader (Lord & Maher, 1991; Schyns, 2006). This prototype is composed of different features like competencies or personality traits (Hogan & Ahmad, 2011). This paper focusses on a part of a bigger study and is devoted to the competencies of an ideal leader in a selling center, which, unlike personality traits, are not fixed but can be developed, for example through training (Kumaranayake, 2017, Harper, 2018).

1.3 Literature Review

This sub-chapter will briefly reflect the current state of research on selling center leadership and will then go into the definition of the term competencies.

Despite the growing interest from practice, understanding is scarce in the literature about how selling centers can be used effectively by organizations (Jones, Dixon, Chonko & Cannon, 2005). Furthermore, selling centers have so far often been understood rather as networks for which a leader is not necessary than as sales project teams managed by a sales project manager. These networks can be divided into friendship networks, communication networks, and advise networks

(Kothandaraman, Agnihotri & Dingus, 2014). The understanding of selling centers as sales project teams which makes a sales project manager necessary (Schwarzkopf, 2019), however, seems to be explained not very well in the literature.

There are numerous discussions and definitions for the concept of competencies (Brown & McCartney, 1995). Even if this paper is not intended to enter into these discussions, the concept of competencies for this study will at least be narrowed down. According to Spencer & Spencer (1993, as cited in Aslan & Pamukcu, 2017), the following definition reflects the common used basic understanding of competencies and therefore it is also used for this work: competencies define the required behaviors which are necessary to be successful in respective discipline (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, as cited in Aslan & Pamukcu, 2017; Springer, 2013).

2. Methodology and Database

For this study, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out with twelve interview participants. Face-to-face avoided speeches of interview participants to overlap (Cheng, 2018). The sample consisted of eight men and four women. The criterion for the selection of these interview participants was that they had already existing selling center experience. The size of the sample was based on the achievement of theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation means that with another interview no further knowledge can be gained (Nascimento, Souza, Oliveira, Moraes, Aguiar & Silva, 2018). Based on the sample, this means that after the interview with the eleventh candidate, no further usable statement was made.

A semi-structured interview format was chosen. Since semi-structured interviews do not follow a rigid structure, relevant text passages, and personal issues of the interview participants can be deepened (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Open questions are mostly used for this purpose and the interviewer should avoid influencing the interview participants (Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 2000).

During the interviews, the interview participants were asked to describe the characteristics of an ideal leader. They were also asked to reflect on whether they would follow this leader in a selling center. Similar to the approach, described by Phin (2017) and Samsonova (2019), all interviews were recorded and transcribed via Microsoft word.

The transcribed interviews were evaluated by applying qualitative content analysis. This qualitative content analysis is commonly used for analyzing qualitative data (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen & Kyngäs, 2014). Qualitative content analysis is a widely used systematic

text analysis that develops text material up into concrete categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It consists of the steps called paraphrasing, generalizing, first reduction, and second reduction (Flick, 2006). While paraphrasing means transforming text material in concise sentences, limited to their content, generalization means paraphrase them to a uniform level of abstraction (Flick, 2006). During both reduction processes sentences with the same content are consolidated and carefully used for inductive category formation (Flick, 2006). Table 1 illustrates this process by way of example.

Table 1: Qualitative Content Analysis

Process Stage	Example
Transcript	When I work in a selling center, I expect the sales representative to recognize customer problems and be able to work out a suitable solution for them.
Paraphrasing	The sales representative should recognize problems and be able to work out solutions for them.
Generalization	Sales representatives should recognize problems and work out solutions for them.
First Reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recognition of problems ● Work out solutions for problems
Second Reduction	Conceptual-analytical competence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recognition of Problems ● Work out solutions for problems

In terms of traceability, the respective analysis units of this qualitative content analysis will briefly be discussed below. These consist of the coding unit, the context unit, and also the evaluation unit. The coding unit refers to the smallest text component (Kuckartz, 2014). The context unit refers to the largest text component (Kuckartz, 2014). The evaluation unit determines the type of text material to be analyzed (Kuckartz, 2014). The coding unit in this analysis process was the spoken word, the context unit was the respective paragraph of an answer given and the evaluation unit was the transcript of an interview participant.

To ensure the quality of this analysis, both a semantic validity check and a test for intracoder reliability were applied.

When checking the semantic validity, it was examined how clearly text passages can be assigned to the respective categories, and if there are any ambiguities (Krippendorff, 2013). For this purpose, all generalizations of all interview participants were compared with the category system created. No new categories had to be created.

When testing intracoder reliability, one interview was selected on a random basis, which was re-analyzed by the coder after 13 days. In this process, the term intracoder reliability refers to the consistency with which the same person can code text material at the same time (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Similar to the semantic validity check, no new categories had to be created here either.

A frequency analysis was also carried out for reasons of transparency and traceability. For this purpose, all generalizations for each category were counted.

3. Results

The following competencies could be analyzed during category formation: conceptual-analytical competence, social-communicative competence, technical-methodical competence, conveyance competence, error competence, and management competence. Table 1 presents the results including the results of the frequency analysis. A brief explanation will also be given for each competence, which also takes into account the statements of the interview participants.

Table 2: Results of the Frequency Analysis

Category	Number of Codes	Number of Participants
Conceptual-analytical competence	14	7
Social-communicative competence	38	10
Technical-methodical competence	31	10
Conveyance competence	2	2
Error competence	11	5
Management competence	13	7

Conceptual-analytical competence means the ability to structure complex problems and to work out concrete solution concepts (Eberl & Schreyögg, 2015). It also includes the establishment of long-term goals and the development of strategic paths (Freyer, 2008).

Social-communicative competencies summarize an individual's communication and cooperation skills (Eberl & Schreyögg, 2015). Social-communicative skills also describe the ability

to deal constructively with conflicts and motivate others (North, Reinhardt & Siber-Sutter, 2018; Košinár, 2014).

Technical-methodical competence is understood in the sales environment as solution orientation, the ability to identify and use sales opportunities, the skill to analyze customer needs, and being able to conduct structured and argumentative discussions (Fauler, 2014).

Conveyance competence refers to the addressee-oriented transfer of knowledge (Luttermann, 2010, as cited in Luttermann & Schäble, 2016, p. 426). This can mean, for example, conveying specifics of the respective customer industry to selling center participants involved.

Error competence describes both the ability to deal with errors immediately when they occur (Rybowiak, Garst, Frese & Batinic, 1999) and being able to learn from them (Wuttke & Seifried, 2017).

Management competence refers to the ability to plan, organize, control, and coordinate (Behle & Hofe, 2014).

4. Conclusion

Six competencies were identified that generate acceptance of leadership in selling centers. Therefore, it can be assumed that competencies play a role in whether the acceptance of leadership in a selling center can arise or not. This study also increases the certainty, unlike given personality traits, that both individuals and organizations can proactively influence the acceptance of leadership in selling centers. This makes the results of this study especially interesting for trainers, coaches, HR developers, and sales staff. The results introduced by this paper are results of a larger mixed method-study, also identifying further characteristics like personality traits (Schwarzkopf, 2019), attitude, and behavior of an ideal leader in the selling center environment.

4.1 Research Limitations

As a qualitative study was used to explore these competencies, there are research limitations to be considered. First of all, it should be mentioned that qualitative studies must not be generalized to the overall population (Queirós, Faria & Almeida, 2017; Zikmund, Alessandro, Winzar, Lowe & Babin, 2017). Furthermore, despite the quality criteria introduced in this paper, qualitative research is not designed to eliminate subjectivity (Kalu, 2019). Frequency analyses used provides information on how significant categories are for the sample (Paley, 2017), but do not replace a quantitative survey with the corresponding sample size (Morgan, 2013). Last but not least, the study

was carried out in Germany, which is why the preferences of other cultures could not be taken into account. However, such differences are suspected by the implicit leadership theory (Lindheim, 2020). It is likely that in other cultural areas further competencies might play a role.

4.2 Implications

Further research potential for this topic arises where the limits of qualitative research begin. The authors could use the results as a starting point for quantitative studies to research if these competencies could be generalized to a larger population. If the results can be confirmed empirically, concepts for competence training can be designed which are tailored to project managers of selling centers.

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