

Servant leadership, proactive work behavior, and performance overall rating:

Testing a multilevel model of moderated mediation

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Acknowledgements: Research reported in this publication was supported by Dirección Xeral de I+D of Xunta de Galicia under award number 2010/PX078.

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Servant leadership, proactive work behavior, and performance: A moderated mediation model

Abstract

Purpose

The goal of this paper is to investigate whether salesperson proactive behavior mediates the relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson overall performance rating by sales manager. Moreover, it examines whether salesperson customer orientation and political skill moderate the sales manager servant leadership – salesperson proactive behavior – salesperson overall performance.

Methodology/approach

The study uses multisource data. To analyze the multilevel moderated mediation process, this investigation uses Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling (MSEM).

Findings

Sales manager servant leadership was positively related to salespeople overall performance rating through their proactive behavior except when their customer orientation was low. Moreover, this relationship between sales manager servant leadership and overall performance rating through proactive work behavior was stronger the greater the salespeople consumer orientation and political skill.

Research implications

The current study has three major limitations: the cross-sectional nature of the research design, the use of a single-item measure to evaluate salesperson overall performance, and the consideration of salesperson proactive work behavior as the only behavioral mediator in the model.

Practical implications

Sales managers should employ servant leadership to stimulate salespeople proactive work behavior. This study clearly indicates the salespeople need to adopt customer orientation and to have political skill. Hence, sales managers need to try to improve the customer

orientation and the political skill of their salespeople through selection procedures or training programs.

Originality/value/contribution

The relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson overall performance through proactive work behavior has not been addressed and tested in the literature to date.

Keywords: Proactive behaviour; servant leadership; performance rating; customer orientation; political skill; salespeople.

Introduction

Servant leadership is an “a holistic approach” (Yoshida, Sedjaya, Hirst, and Cooper 2014, 1395) to leadership that can be effective in current times of increasing change and complexity. Servant leadership, a values-based leadership form, was proposed in the 70s (Greenleaf 1970 1977) but its conceptual analysis by academic researchers began in nineties (e.g., Graham 1991; Spears 1995). Since then researchers have paid increasing attention to it, especially in recent years (e.g., Bande, Fernández-Ferrín, Varela-Neira, and Otero-Neira 2016; Carter and Baghurst 2014; Chan and Mak 2014; Chen, Zhu, and Zhou 2015; Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser 2014; Parris and Peachey 2013; Schwepker 2016; Van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, de Windt, and Alkema 2014). Among the reasons that have stimulated an increased interest in servant leadership are the scandals around managers’ unethical behavior in organizations over the last decade (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohm, and Wu, in press). In addition, the persistent focus on servant leadership appears to be well founded due to the managers’ need to utilize “new mental models that will allow them to be teachers, enablers, stewards, and servants” (Ingram, LaForge, Locander, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2005, 141).

To date, research on servant leadership has examined its relationship with individual performance and several employees’ attitudes (e.g., Zhao, Liu, and Gao 2016). In the sales context, researchers have analyzed the relationship between sales managers’ servant leadership and salespeople’ intention to leave (Bande, Fernández-Ferrín, Varela, and Jaramillo 2015; Bande et al. 2016; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, and Roberts 2009b) and performance (e.g., Jaramillo, Bande, and Varela 2015; Schwepker and Schultz 2015).

Although researchers have made relevant contributions in elucidating

consequences of servant leadership on employee outcomes, according to the meta-analytic review by Hoch et al. (in press, 13-14), “the extant empirical research associated with servant leadership is somewhat sparse and the research that has been conducted has not had a consistent focus”. To contribute to servant leadership research, the current study analyzes whether sales manager servant leadership is positively related to salesperson overall performance by sales manager through salesperson proactive work behavior.

Proactive work behavior has been conceptualized by Griffin, Neal, and Parker (2007) in their new model of work role performance as a construct which incorporates role behaviors that can contribute to organizational effectiveness. According to Parker, Williams, and Turner (2006, 636), proactive behavior is a higher-order category of motivated behaviors that refers to “self-initiated and future-oriented action that aims to change and improve the situation or oneself”.

We examine the mediating role of salesperson work proactive behavior for several reasons. First, today’s sales forces operate in environments characterized by market turbulence, competitive intensity, technological turbulence, and the use of multiple channels (Ingram et al. 2005) and, in these contexts, salespeople need to carry out behaviors beyond task performance, such as proactive work behavior. Second, despite its importance, proactive work behavior has been little analyzed in sales context (for exceptions see Bande et al. 2016; Pitt, Ewing, and Berthon 2002). Third, servant leaders could stimulate proactive work behavior and this behavior could increase salesperson performance rating. As noted by Posdakoff and Mackenzie (1994, 351), “In many circumstances, managers also take into account other aspects of a salesperson's behavior that, in their judgment, make a contribution to the effective functioning of the organization”.

Moreover, the current study analyzes, first, the moderating role of salesperson customer orientation (CO) in the servant leadership — proactive behavior relationship and, second, the moderating role of salesperson political skill in the proactive behavior — overall performance relationships. Incorporating to the model individual work values and skills we expect to provide a better understanding of the pathway analyzed.

In this study, we assume Zablah, Franke, Brown, and Bartholomew's (2012) viewpoint. These authors see CO as a work value, that is, as “an aspect of workers' psychology that guides their on-the-job perception, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. 34). We select this conceptualization because in their meta-analysis they found that CO as a psychological variable that captures an individual work value has better fit than CO as a set of behaviors.

We examine the moderating role of CO because (1) the sales manager servant leadership — salesperson proactive work behavior relationship may be moderated by individual work values (e.g., CO) and (2) Bagozzi, Verbeke, Van der Berg, Rietdijk, and Dietvorst (2012, 647) showed that CO is associated with the 7R allele of the DRD4 gene, a biomarker suggesting that salespeople with high CO are “curious, seek novelty, and are intrinsically motivated”.

Political skill refers to “the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives” (Ferris, Treadway, Perrewé, Brouer, Douglas, and Lux 2007, 291). Although political skill is positively related to performance (see meta-analytic review of Munyon, Summers, Thompson, and Ferris 2015), their consideration in the sales and marketing literature is very recent (Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, and Ferris 2015).

We examine the moderating role of political skill because, although most proactive behavior models consider a simple, direct positive relationship between this behavior and performance “with little consideration being given to factors that might moderate this relationship” (Fuller, Marler, and Hester 2006, 1058), several researchers have argued that proactive behavior may not always yield favorable performance evaluations by supervisors. For example, Parker, Williams, and Turner (2006) maintain that proactive behavior can involve a greater degree of personal risk than other work behaviors. In view of the possibility of these different effects, several researchers have called to examine the moderating effect of individual characteristics in the proactive behavior — overall performance ratings relationship (e.g., Grant and Ashford 2008; Grant, Parker, and Collins 2009). Since salesperson political skill is relevant to his/her success within the organization (Mintzberg 1985), this social effectiveness construct may be a potentially important moderating factor in the relationship between proactive behavior and overall performance rating.

In sum, we build over the previous literature and, by proposing and testing a multi-level model of moderated mediation which investigates the moderating effects of salesperson customer orientation and political skill in the sales manager servant leadership — salesperson proactive behavior — overall performance rating by sales manager pathway, advance on the knowledge in the field. Specifically, we contribute to the organizational and sales literature at least in four ways. First, and relevant for practice, we highlight the critical role of sales managers’ employees-oriented leadership behaviors (e.g., Van Dierendonck 2011; Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, and Avolio 2010) in promoting proactive work behavior. Second, we integrate insights from the servant leadership, work role performance, and performance evaluation theories by considering the mediating effect of proactive behavior on the sales manager servant

leadership — overall performance rating relationship, a process not previously explored. Third, by examining the moderating effect of CO we add to recent literature that analyzes the relationship between servant leadership and proactive work behavior (Bande et al. 2016). Fourth, by exploring the moderating role of political skill we respond to calls to examine moderators in the relationship between proactive behavior and performance (e.g., Bindl and Parker 2011; Kim, Cable, Kim, and Wang 2009) and, more specifically, individual characteristics (Belschak, Den Hartog, and Fay 2010).

Last, our study tests the posited model with data provided by salespeople and their sales managers. Doing so reduces the possibility of common-method biases, as measures of the predictor and criterion variables were obtained from different sources (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). The proposed and tested model is showed in Figure 1.

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Theory and hypothesis

Sales manager servant leadership and salesperson overall performance

Leadership is a critical factor via which many other organizational factors are filtered. Leadership focuses on “influencing others to achieve common goals for the collective good of the organization” (Ingram et al. 2005, 137).

The term *servant leadership* was introduced by Greenleaf (1970) to designate a type of leadership characterized by going beyond one’s self-interest. Servant-leaders are motivated by the need to serve (Luthans and Avolio 2003), feel responsible for the growth of individual employees, try to increase the autonomy and responsibility of followers, and generate opportunities to make possible followers grow (Liden, Wayne,

Zhao, and Henderson 2008). Servant leadership is directed at trust, empowerment, and ethical and caring behaviors (Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora 2008). Van Dierendonck (2011, 1231) states that for servant leaders “serving and leading become almost exchangeable”.

Although servant leadership has some similar characteristics with transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, and/or consideration structure, empirical research has demonstrated its incremental value, as evidenced by the additional variance over these constructs (Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, and Hu 2014; Liden, Wayne, Meuser, Hu, Whu, and Liao 2015). For example, in Hoch’s et al. (2016, 2) study comparing three forms of positive leadership that emphasize ethical and moral behavior (i.e., authentic leadership, ethical leadership, and servant leadership), they state that “Servant leadership, however, showed more promise [that authentic leadership and ethical leadership] as a stand-alone leadership approach that is capable of helping leadership researchers and practitioners better explain a wide range of outcomes”.

The sales literature has analyzed how transactional/transformational leadership is related to salespeople outcomes (e.g., Bande et al. 2016; Bass 1997; Epitropaki and Martin 2005; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich 2001), but fewer studies have devoted attention to the relationship between servant leadership and salespeople outcomes. For example, Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, and Roberts (2009a) found, in a study of salespeople, a correlation of .24 between servant leadership and self-reported performance. Schwepker and Schultz (2015) reported a significant direct relationship between servant leadership and outcome performance. Based on the previous results, we posit:

Hypothesis 1: Sales manager servant leadership is positively associated with salesperson overall performance rating.

Sales manager servant leadership, salesperson proactive behavior, and overall performance ratings

Work performance' nature and dimensionality has interested organizational scientists for decades. In today's setting, characterized by high uncertain and complexity in inputs, processes or outputs, it is ineffective to formalize the requirements of work roles. In this environment, new types of behaviors, such as proactive behavior, may to be essential for organizational effectiveness (e.g., Crant 2000; Griffin et al. 2007).

In this study, we focus on proactive work behavior (or proactivity) as it has been conceptualized by Griffin et al. (2007), in their new model of work role performance. To Griffin et al. (2007, 329), proactivity refers to "the extent to which the individual takes self-directed action to anticipate or initiate change in the work system or work roles", and can contribute to organizational effectiveness at the following levels: individual (e.g., "initiates a better way of doing core tasks"), team (e.g., "develops new methods to help the team perform better"), and organization (e.g., "makes suggestions to improve the overall efficiency of the organization") (Griffin et al. 2007, 330).

Different names recognize proactive behaviors at work: seeking feedback, taking initiative in pursuing personal and organizational goals, expressing voice, selling issues, taking charge, navigating, implementing ideas and solving problems (Grant and Ashford 2008; Parker, Williams, and Turner 2006; Plouffe and Barclay 2007; Plouffe, Sridharan, and Barclay 2010). Other forms of proactive behavior are individual innovation, problem prevention, and career initiative (Parker and Collins 2010).

In changing environments, sales managers can expect and encourage salespeople

to carry out proactive behavior. Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal (2011, 411) note that salespeople “can be conceived [by sales managers] as proactive agents who display personal initiative, improve current circumstances, and/or create new ones”. Reciprocity norm (Gouldner 1960) and relational identification theory (e.g., Chen, Zhu, and Zhou 2015; Zhao, Liu, and Gao 2016) provide support to the relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson proactive behavior.

According to the reciprocity norm, employees reciprocate organizational actions that positively affect their well-being with positive behaviors (Hu and Liden 2011). When a salesperson has a servant leader and, consequently, works in an environment with larger access to resources such as knowledge, friendship and advice, sales manager’ time, greater autonomy, and open communication, he or she could reciprocate through proactive work behaviors perceived to be beneficial for the supervisor and/or the organization.

Identification theory also supports the servant leadership – proactive behavior relationship. Individuals tend to define themselves not only in relation to groups (e.g., social identification theory, Tajfel and Turner 1979), such as organizations (Ashforth and Mael 1989), but also in relation to other individuals. Social identification informs the collective self and is associated with depersonalization while interpersonal forms of identification personalize their self-identity (Hogg, Knippenberg, and Rast 2012; Sluss and Ashforth 2007).

Interpersonal identification refers to the extent to which an individual’s beliefs about another one become self-defining (Ahearne, Lam, Hayati, and Kraus 2013). The identification between an employee and his/her leader is one of the most important types of interpersonal identification in the workplace. When employees view a

supervisor' behavior as empathic, with foresight, stewardship, and committed to people' growth, employees will identify with the supervisor, thus it is affecting how they act (Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, and Hogg 2004).

Several researchers have showed that organizational identification increases employee voice behavior (Liu, Zhu, and Yang 2010), predicts pro-change behavior (Fuchs and Edwards 2012) and employee readiness for organizational change (Hameed, Roques, and Arain 2013). In a similar way, whenever salespeople identify with sales managers' values and assume servant leadership values as their own, salespeople will likely increase their proactive behavior.

Salespeople's proactive behaviors are likely to increase the overall performance rating provided by sales managers in the changing sales environment. Two views support this relationship: reciprocity norm (Gouldner 1960) and social information processing theory (e.g., DeNisi, Cafferty, and Meglino 1984; Feldman 1986).

A salesperson who takes initiative in pursuing goals, taking charge, and implementing individual innovation will probably make a bigger contribution to their organizational unit effectiveness than one that does not behave in such a way. By increasing the effectiveness, these behaviors likely enhance sales manager performance rating. In this situation, sales manager may reciprocate proactive behaviors (e.g., Frese and Fay 2001), responding with higher overall performance ratings.

Second, the social information processing theory stipulates that individuals have limited information processing capabilities and, as a consequence, they take many shortcuts when they have to evaluate others. That is, they use cognitive simplifications based on only part of the available information. In essence, the raters (i.e., sales managers) (1) attend to information that is salient and (2) mentally assign employees to

categories (e.g., good employee; see Murphy and Cleveland 1991) on the basis of their salient characteristics.

When sales managers have to rate the overall performance of their salespeople, they will search for “distinctiveness information” (Podsakoff and Mackenzie 1994, 374). Proactive behavior is likely to be regarded as a particularly distinctive and salient behavioral cue of salespeople’s behavior. For this reason, proactive work behavior will have a high probability of being remembered and used by sales managers in forming overall performance ratings.

It is then possible that one of the ways sales managers evaluate salespeople is by implicitly trying to determine the extent to which they match the category of “good salesperson” (Podsakoff and Mackenzie 1994). Given that to introduce new work methods, identify and acquire new technological skills, help others on the job, change the communication system for the team, build relationships with employees from other departments, and so on, are actions guided towards preventing individual and organizational problems in sales organizations, which may contribute toward the effective functioning of the organization, proactive behavior can be linked to the “good salesperson” category.

Taken together, the above arguments suggest proactive behavior can be a salient behavioral cue that sales managers may use to categorize salespeople so that those who exhibit higher levels of proactive behavior could receive higher overall performance ratings than those who exhibit lower levels of proactive behavior.

Because servant leadership can encourage salespeople’ proactive behavior and proactive behavior can boost overall performance ratings by sales managers, servant leadership can increase performance ratings (indirect effect). According to these

observations, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between sales manager servant leadership and overall performance rating is positively mediated by salesperson proactive behavior.

Moderating role of customer orientation

In their influential presentation of the selling orientation – customer orientation (SOCO) scale Saxe and Weitz (1982, 344) defined CO as “the degree to which salespeople practice the marketing concept by trying to help their customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs”. Therefore, CO is the manifestation of the marketing concept at the individual worker level.

Market orientation has been conceptualized as organizational culture (Narver and Slater 1990) and a set of customer-driven behaviors (Kholi and Jaworski 1990). Similarly, customer orientation can be viewed as “an employee’s tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job context” (Brown, Mowen, Donovan, and Licata 2002, 111) or as “a set of behaviors indicating a high concern for customer interests and needs and ensuring long-term customer satisfaction” (Homburg, Müller and Klarmann 2011, 798).

According to Zablah et al. (2012, 34) the CO view as a work value is supported by the findings of their meta-analytic study. In addition they noted that “this conceptualization bridges the psychological and behavioral perspectives on CO [...], is consistent with the development of the marketing concept at the organizational level [...] and thus serves to build common ground between two important research streams”. Moreover, Mullins and Syam (2014, 190) stated that CO is “one of the most integral work values for sales organizations”. Work values refer to generally enduring beliefs

about the desirability of different aspects of work and work-related outcomes (Lyons, Higgins, and Duxbury 2010).

Salespeople with high CO will seek sources of industry-related knowledge, learn from customers, and select the best solutions for customers. As work values guide perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors across time and contexts (Brown and Trevino 2009; Fock, Yim, and Rodríguez 2010; Terho, Eggert, Haas, and Ulaga 2015), CO will likely lead salespeople to take initiative, to be change oriented, and to be proactive.

According to Parker, Bindl, and Strauss' (2010) theoretical model of proactive work behavior, employees' values and orientations interact with their social context to generate proactive behavior. The current study is based on that framework and proposes that salesperson CO moderates the relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson proactive behavior. Moreover, since the organizational literature has showed that the values congruence (e.g., House 1996) among employees and supervisors (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Locke 1996) reinforces these values, strengthening and activating their motivational properties, we expect that the positive relationship between sales manager' servant leadership (i.e., a social context characteristic) and salesperson proactive work behavior will be increased by salesperson CO (i.e., an individual work value).

CO is related to a salesperson "concern for others" and "need satisfaction/problem solution selling approaches" (Saxe and Weitz 1982, 344), while servant leadership is associated with allowing freedom for followers (others) to exercise their own abilities and place them a much higher degree of trust (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson 2008; Schwepker and Good 2013; Van Dierendonck 2011). Therefore, since both servant leadership by sales managers and CO by salespeople are oriented to

the others, they are congruent, and their interaction should positively influence proactive work behavior. Then,

Hypothesis 3: Salesperson CO moderates the relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson proactive behavior, so that the relationship will be stronger for salespeople with high CO and weaker for salespeople with low CO.

Moderating role of political skill

Political skill is a social effectiveness construct (see Kimura 2015, for a qualitative review) especially relevant to success within the organization (Mintzberg 1985; Pfeffer 1981). Moreover, previous research has found a positive relationship between political skill and performance (see Bing, Davison, Minor, Novicevic, and Frink 2011; Munyon, et al. 2015, for meta-analytic reviews).

Research on political skill (e.g., Blickle, Meurs, Zettler, Solga, Noethen, Kramer, and Ferris 2008; Ferris, Davidson, and Perrewé 2005) indicates that it comprised four sub-dimensions (1) social astuteness, (2) interpersonal influence, (3) networking ability, and (4) ability to project sincerity. Therefore, politically skilled individuals have the ability to accurately understand social interactions and present their behavior in the most effective way in each situation, leading others to interpret the motives of their behavior as authentic, and not as manipulative or self-serving (Ferris, Davidson, and Perrewé 2005). In addition, through their networking ability, politically skilled individuals develop and participate in networks that can help them enhance their reputation, which would positively impact their supervisor evaluation (Ferris, Perrewé, Anthony, and Gilmore 2000). Political skill provides to individuals the ability to recognize and capitalize on opportunities (e.g., Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, and Munyon

2012).

Based on signaling theory (Spence, 1974), we argue that individual differences in salespeople' political skill might be a moderator in the proactive behavior – overall performance rating to encourage favorable impressions in sales managers because politically skilled individuals have the ability to present their proactive behaviors in a way that is positive to their supervisor and inspire his/her trust. Therefore, when salespeople with high political skill exhibit proactive behavior, they can likely manage their supervisor's impressions of them and the resulting good relationship with their sales managers can help them to get better overall performance ratings. Pfeffer (2009, 68) stated that political skill “. . .helps individuals put a gloss on their performance that ensures a higher rating” while Ferris et al. (2012) proposed that political skill should play a key role in interpersonal interactions such as performance evaluation. Based on the previous arguments, we posit:

Hypothesis 4: Salesperson political skill moderates the relationship between salesperson proactive work behavior and overall performance rating by sales manager, so that the relationship will be stronger for salespeople with high political skill and weaker for salespeople with low political skill.

Finally, as salesperson CO is expected to moderate the relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson proactive behavior (Hypothesis 3) and as salesperson political skill is expected to moderate the relationship between salesperson proactive behavior and overall performance rating by sales manager (Hypothesis 4), the mediating effects of proactive behavior on servant leadership – overall performance rating will likely be moderated. Hence, the pattern of the effects that are described in this article fits with the moderated mediation model that was suggested by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007). Specifically, in a context of servant leadership by sales

managers, salespeople with high customer orientation will perceive their values congruent with their sales managers' values which will probably facilitate and encourage proactive behaviors. In this context favorable to proactive behaviors, the social competence of politically skilled salespeople can help them to present these behaviors in a way that is favorably perceived and interpreted by sales managers. his for the first paragraph in a section, or to continue after an extract.

Methodology

Sample and survey procedure

Sales managers and salespeople participating in this research were 83 and 181 respectively. They worked in a range of industries, including both manufacturing and service industries. Average size of firms was 54 employees. Although the product lines carried differ, the operating environments of salespeople were similar: to visit, listen, advise and sell products and/or services to customers. We assured confidentiality to all respondents to encourage sincere responses. The sales managers and salespeople in the sample were predominantly male, 88% and 74% respectively.

Sales managers had an average sales experience of 10.4 years (std. dev. 8.1) and an average organizational tenure of 13.6 years (std. dev. 10.1). The mean age of the respondents was 45 (std. dev. 9.0). Salespeople had an average sales experience of 11.3 years (std. dev. 7.9) and an average organizational tenure of 7.6 years (std. dev. 7.7). The mean age of the respondents was 39 (std. dev. 8.2).

Measures and measure assessment

The constructs considered in this study can be measured by sales managers or by salespeople. We use sales managers' reports about salespeople's proactive behavior and overall performance rating. Sales managers also informed about product reputation and

company size. However, customer orientation, servant leadership, and political skill were measured with information provided by the salespeople. Salespeople reports are appropriate as the constructs measured are perception about supervisor's servant leadership, and salesperson values and skills. To measure the dependent variable with information provided by the supervisors and predictors with information provided by the salespeople reduces the possibility of common-method biases (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff 2003; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012).

Variables were measured through 1-7 point Likert scales (see Appendix 1), continuous variables (salesperson age, job experience, organizational tenure, and company size), and categorical variables (salesperson gender).

Supervisor servant leadership

Ehrhart's (2004) scale was used to measure servant leadership. The five items selected were those with the highest factor loadings reported in Jaramillo's et al. (2009a) study.

Customer orientation

The measure of CO is the 5-item scale developed by from Periatt, LeMay, and Chakrabarty (2004).

Proactive behavior

This construct was measured using the nine items scale of work proactive behavior developed by Griffin et al. (2007), three for task level, three for team level, and three for organizational level.

Political skill

The measure of this construct is the 18-item of PSI scale developed by Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, Kacmar, Douglas, and Frink 2005). Five items corresponded to social astuteness dimension; four, to interpersonal influence dimension; six, to networking ability dimension; and three, to apparent sincerity dimension.

Overall performance rating

This construct was measured using an item that indicated the overall subjective performance evaluation by sales manager (1= the salesperson has lacked much to achieve the goals set by management; 7= the salesperson has widely exceeded goals set by management).

Products' reputation

This construct was measured using a 3-item scale developed by authors.

Control variables

In order to avoid the confounding effects of other variables also likely to be related to proactive work behavior and overall performance appraisal, we control for age, job experience, organizational tenure, and gender. We also include products reputation and company size as control variable to isolate any systematic potential impact for such factors on the study variables.

Analysis and results

As salespeople are nested within sales managers, the current study uses multilevel analysis to account for the hierarchical structure of data. This approach is in line with a growing body of research using multilevel modeling in sales and service contexts (e.g., Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann 2011).

The data were analyzed in several phases. First, the statistical justification to treat servant leadership as a group-level variable was investigated. The aggregation of servant leadership to the group level was examined through three aggregation statistics: two interrater reliability indices (ICC1 and ICC2; Bliese 2000) and one interrater agreement index (rwg; James, Demaree, and Wolf 1984). The average ICCs for servant leadership were ICC1=.454 and ICC2=.640. The interrater agreement (rwg) was equal to .922. The ICC1 scores showed sufficient between group variance in the construct to

explain the variance in the dependent variables (Murphy and Myor, 1998). The ICC2, indicating whether the construct could be aggregated to a higher level, was more than the accepted threshold of .60 (Glick 1985). The interrater agreement statistic showed that it is reasonable and meaningful to aggregate servant leadership to the group level. As a consequence, we analyzed servant leadership as a group-level variable.

Second, confirmatory factor analyses were carried out in EQS 6.1. in order to confirm the constructs' reliability and validity. The fit of the political skill measure was analysed by building a second order factor from its four dimensions, obtaining acceptable fit indices ($\chi^2(103) = 226.352$ ($p < .001$); CFI= .923; IFI = .924; SRMR = .070).

Next, the fit of the whole model (servant leadership, CO, proactive performance, overall performance appraisal, political skill, and product reputation) was examined, obtaining acceptable results ($\chi^2(719) = 1213.825$ ($p < .001$); CFI=.913; IFI=.914; SRMR=.075; RMSEA=.067). Regarding reliability, the constructs manifested a composite reliability and AVE greater than the recommended threshold values of .6 and .5, respectively (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). All constructs also had a Cronbach alpha coefficient greater than .7 (Nunnally 1978). With respect to validity, all lambda parameters were significant and greater than .5, hence, supporting convergent validity (see Appendix 1).

Furthermore, correlations among all the variables showed confidence intervals that did not include the unit value and their squared value did not exceed the AVE, hence, supporting discriminant validity (see Table 1). This provided evidence of the validity and reliability of the measurement instrument (Bollen 1989).

To calculate the descriptive statistics relating to the latent constructs, they were replaced by the average value of their items (see Table 1).

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This study proposes a moderated mediation model in which sales manager servant leadership is modeled as affecting overall performance appraisal through proactive behavior and the strength of the mediation described depends on the levels of salesperson CO and political skill. This model matches Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), where X is servant leadership, Y is overall performance rating, M is proactive behavior, W is customer orientation, and Z is political skill.

To assess the proposed multilevel moderated mediation process, Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling (MSEM) analyses were carried out following the steps outlined by Hayes (2009), Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) and Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang (2010). Stata 13 was used to analyze the hypotheses, because it is a natural choice for multilevel modeling (Rabe-Hesketh, Skrondal, and Pickles 2004).

As we can see in Table 2, servant leadership has a positive and significant relationship with overall performance rating. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Hypothesis 2 is also supported because proactive work behavior mediates the servant leadership — overall performance rating relationship. Servant leadership has a positive and significant relationship with overall performance rating when proactive work behavior is not included in the analysis, but this relationship becomes non-significant when proactive behavior is included in the analysis.

As shown in Table 2, the interaction of servant leadership with CO is significantly and positively related to proactive work behavior, supporting Hypothesis 3. This indicates a stronger positive relationship between servant leadership and proactive behavior the higher the CO. In a similar way, the interaction of proactive behavior with political skill is significantly and positively related to overall performance rating by sales manager, supporting Hypothesis 4. This indicates a stronger positive

relationship between proactive work behavior and overall performance rating the higher the political skill. The interactions are plotted in Figure 2 and 3 using the process proposed by Dawson (2014).

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Based on Preacher *et al.* (2007), to further assess moderated mediation, the significance of the indirect relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson overall performance rating via proactive behavior for low/moderate/high calculated using bootstrapped 95 per cent CIs (derived from 5,000 replications). The results showed that servant leadership is positively and indirectly related to overall performance rating via proactive work behavior when CO is high or moderate and political skill is high, moderate or low; however, when CO is low the effect becomes non-significant. Therefore, moderated mediation is supported. Moreover, the results showed that the positive indirect relationship between servant leadership and overall performance rating via proactive work behavior is greater at higher levels of CO and higher levels of political skill.

Regarding the control variables, the results showed that job experience, age, gender, and products reputation are significantly related to proactive behavior, and products reputation is also significantly related to overall performance rating. Men showed higher proactive work behavior than women, and the greater the salesperson's job experience, the greater the proactive behavior. Conversely, salesperson age had a negative relationship with proactive work behavior.

[t] Table 3 near here [/t]

Discussion

The current study follows Ingram's et al. (2005, 140) suggestion regarding further analysis on leadership styles, focusing particularly on "the key challenges sales leaders face in a changing environment characterized by the dimensions of complexity, collaboration, and accountability". Servant leadership is a type of supportive leadership that encourages employees' proactive work behavior nowadays.

Proactive work behavior is a constructive and functional behavior (Morrison and Phelps 1999) with potential to influence performance assessment by supervisors. Although it is important to recognize that there may be other important types of behavior that sales managers take into account in their evaluations of salespeople performance, our study proposed and tested a multi-level model in which proactive behavior mediates the relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson overall performance rating, being this nomological network moderated by salesperson CO and political skill. We focus on proactive behavior because, despite its importance, it has hardly been analyzed in the sales context (see Pitt, Ewing and Berthon 2002; Bande et al. 2016, for exceptions).

Results showed that servant leadership by sales manager is directly and positively related to salesperson proactive work behavior. This result confirms the view of supportive supervision as an environment that facilitates proactive work behavior. Results also found that salesperson proactive work behavior is directly and positively related to salesperson overall performance rating by sales managers. Our result supports that obtained by Pitt, Ewing, and Berthon (2002), who using a simple ordinal logistic

regression procedure found that proactive behavior was a small but significant predictor of salesperson performance, with the performance rating as a true ordinal dependent variable. The positive relationship found between proactive work behavior and overall performance rating suggests that sales managers consider proactive behavior to be an important part of an employee's overall contribution to the sales organization.

Moreover, servant leadership by sales manager is indirectly and positively related to overall performance rating through proactive work behavior, except when salesperson CO is low. Therefore, our results indicate that proactive behavior can be a "high-leverage concept" (Crant, 2000, 435) and highlight the importance of proactive work behavior by salespeople.

Regarding the moderating effect of CO, the results indicated that sales manager servant leadership is not sufficient to generate a high level of salesperson overall performance rating, it is also necessary for the salesperson to have at least a moderate level of CO. This result helps answer to the question of whether servant leadership is universally effective or its effectiveness depends on individual factors.

Furthermore, results supported the moderating role of salesperson political skill on the servant leadership – proactive behavior – overall performance rating pathway. More specifically, a higher salesperson political skill always increased the effect of sales manager servant leadership on overall performance rating through proactive behavior when salesperson CO was moderate or high.

In summary, servant leadership was not related to overall performance rating via proactive behavior when salesperson CO was low. However, servant leadership was positively and indirectly related to overall performance rating via proactive work behavior when salesperson CO was moderate or high for all values of political skill.

Moreover, the highest value of salesperson overall performance rating was achieved when the salesperson had high CO and high political skill.

Limitations and future research

The current study has three major limitations that future research should consider. First, the cross-sectional nature of the research design, which does not allow to definitively establish a causal direction from sales manager servant leadership to salesperson overall performance rating through proactive behavior. Although a competing or alternative explanation may be that work-related outcomes (i.e., overall performance rating) may predict antecedents (i.e., servant leadership), the theory-building foundation and the statistical analyses performed are amenable to our interpretation. Second, we used a single-item measure to evaluate the salesperson overall performance. Although this measure synthesizes the overall evaluation received by the salesperson in the last performance appraisal, a multi-item performance measure might be more appropriate. Third, we examined proactive work behavior as the only behavioral mediator in the model; however there may be other mediators. Therefore, researchers can focus on alternative mediating variables to improve salesperson performance.

In addition to the points made above, several other avenues should be addressed in future research. It is necessary to develop a much better understanding of proactive work behavior consequences, in particular of its dysfunctional consequences, such as work overload, emotional exhaustion, and work–family conflict. Future studies that analyze these outcomes would be particularly valuable.

Finally, future research should also examine the moderating role of other individual values, orientations, and traits in the sales manager servant leadership — proactive work behavior — overall performance rating pathway. Our findings are very encouraging in this respect.

Implications for business marketing practice

Our findings fit nicely within the existing literature on servant leadership and proactivity and thus build on them to create some practical implications for sales organizations and managers. Salespeople's role consists of identifying and analyzing the customer's needs while providing a solution for the customers' problems. However, the dynamic, competitive, and changing nature of the environment in which salespeople perform their role, makes proactive behaviors especially significant in obtaining a successful result. Consequently, the salesperson is increasingly encouraged to carry out behaviors beyond task performance, as taking initiative in pursuing goals, taking charge, and implementing individual innovation. In this context, current organizations are seeking to understand how to stimulate proactive behavior among their employees while also increasingly expecting employees to engage in such behavior (Bindl and Parker 2011; Fuller, Marler and Hester 2012). With this regards, our findings indicate that sales managers might employ servant leadership to stimulate salespeople proactive work behavior. Proactivity is particularly significant in those professions which involve certain degree of uncertainty and where certain roles lack formalization. This is common within the sales positions, where salespeople are obliged to interact with customers whose needs are constantly changing. Sales managers, by focusing on serving others first while displaying kindness, humility, and compassion, can contribute to stimulate their salespeople proactivity. However, our findings confirm that servant leadership goes beyond enhancing salesperson proactive behaviors. Consistent with previous research that link proactivity with work enjoyment and improved performance (e.g. Tims et al., 2013), our results suggest that sales managers should be encouraged to engage in servant leader behaviors because these behaviors contribute to enhance the salesperson overall performance ratings. In line with the evidence that companies with a component of servant leaders perform better than the average business, our study encourages sales organizations to invest in leadership development and in auditing their servant leadership approach for improvement. This implies that sales managers should appreciate and value people, and emphasize on the interaction with salespeople. Sales

managers should also foster a sense of psychological safety, trust and fairness in the work context.

Notwithstanding, salespeople may perceive servant leadership differently than sales managers. This is consistent with the lack of congruence that usually exists between supervisor and subordinate ratings of managerial practices. Given that in our study servant leadership was measured by salespeople through their own cognitive schemas for attending to and processing information, it is important that sales managers pay more attention to how their behavior is perceived by salespeople, in order for servant leadership to have the desired effect on salespeople proactive behavior. For example, Jaramillo et al., (2015) recently noted that salespeople that perceived their supervisor as relying on behavioral control mechanisms were less likely to think that he was a servant leader, even when the servant leader was reporting himself as one. Thus, as organizations usually employ sales control systems as a tool in directing the sales force for desired organizational objectives, sales managers who exhibit a service-oriented approach to leadership could consider using more outcome-based control mechanisms in order to be perceived as true servant leaders and positively influence the proactive behavior of their subordinates.

In addition, our findings suggest that the positive indirect effect of servant leadership on salesperson overall performance ratings is contingent on salesperson's customer orientation. In fact, when salesperson customer orientation is low, the indirect effect of servant leadership on salesperson overall performance is not significant. Thus, the moderating role of salesperson customer orientation as a work value on the relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson proactive work behavior clearly underlines the relevance of enhancing customer orientation skills within salespeople. These findings clarify the conditions under which servant leadership is effective. In fact, our results suggest that it is not enough for sales managers to focus on servant leadership as a way to enhance salespeople proactive work behavior. By prioritizing employee development and by being committed to principles of honesty and

integrity, sales managers can contribute to enhance their employees' proactivity only when those employees have a high or moderate level of customer orientation. Consequently, in a support context characterized by servant leadership, sales organizations should select candidates with a high, or at least moderate, customer orientation and strengthen work values such as customer orientation in their current salespeople. With this regards and similar to any employee skill, salesperson's customer orientation could be improved through training. In addition, sales managers could concentrate on recruiting salespeople who already have the ability to seek sources of industry-related knowledge, learn from customers, and select the best solutions for customers. Alternatively, sales organizations looking to enhance their employee's customer orientation might contribute to create a positive work environment as there is evidence that it contributes to customer-orientated behavior (Grizzle et al., 2009). In sum, sales managers should focus their attention on establishing a customer-oriented sales force, while considering the predisposition to meet customers' needs as a relevant criterion in sales force decisions, particularly when it comes to enhance their proactive behavior.

Third, proactive work behavior was positively related to overall performance rating. From the salespeople perspective, this result should encourage them to carry out proactive behaviors as a way to increase their performance rating. From the sales organization perspective, the positive relationship between proactive behavior and overall performance rating seems to imply that sales managers consider proactive behavior has a positive contribution to the effectiveness of organizations. If this is the case, sales managers should not only ensure that salespeople proactive work behavior is recognized, but they should also verify that salespeople are aware that proactive behavior is appreciated. In addition, sales managers should consider other ways to encourage proactive work behaviors. For example, previous research has noted that organizations can stimulate their salespeople proactivity by reducing the work-family conflict they suffer. In addition, there is evidence that a combination of perceived self-

efficacy and intrinsic motivation contributes to enhance the salesperson's proactive behavior (Bande & Fernández-Ferrín, 2015).

Fourth, our results showed that salesperson political skill strengthens the indirect relationship between sales manager servant leadership and salesperson overall performance rating through proactive behavior. Thus, the positive effects of servant leadership behaviors on salesperson overall performance rating through proactivity depends not only on the salesperson's customer orientation but also on his political abilities. In fact, for those salespeople who are high both in customer orientation and in political skill, servant leadership is more effective. From the salespeople perspective, our results should persuade them to augment their political skill as a way to improve their performance rating. Although there is evidence that political skill is partly predicted by personal disposition, it is a malleable skill and as such, it can be developed through training and socialization (Ferris et al., 2007) From the sales organization perspective, and under the assumption that a higher overall performance rating is associated with greater sales organization effectiveness, sales organizations could include specific seminars on political skill as part of their ongoing training programs as a way to improve the social and interpersonal skills of their salespeople. In addition, there is evidence that formal mentoring programs can help individuals acquire political skill through a social learning process (Blass & Ferris, 2007). In this sense, sales managers should introduce interventions to strength relationships between high-skilled and low-skilled salespeople, so that high-skilled ones may act as models. Moreover, recent research suggests that political skill, particularly the networking ability, can be increased autonomously (Oerder et al., 2014). Thus, the job demands of a specific sales position can contribute to change the salesperson's social and interpersonal skills.

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Appendix 1: Measurement scales used and properties

MEASUREMENT MODEL (FIT INDICES):

Chi² (719) = 1213.825 p<0.001

CFI=0.913 IFI=0.914 RMSEA=0.067

SRMR=0.075

Note. CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; α = Cronbach alpha coefficient

All standardized loadings are significant ($p < 0.01$)

	St. load
Customer orientation (CR = 0.854; AVE = 0.542; α = 0.830)	
I try to figure out what customer needs are	.642
A good employee has to have the customer's best interest in mind	.688
I try to bring a customer with a problem together with a product/service that helps solve that problem	.870
I offer the product/service that is best suited to the customer's problem	.770
I try to find out what kind of products/services will be most helpful to a customer	.690
<hr/>	
	St. load
Servant leadership (CR = 0.913; AVE = 0.676; α = 0.910)	
My department manager spends the time to form quality relationships with department employees	.790

My department managers creates a sense of community among department employees	.852
My department managers makes the personal development of department employees a priority	.827
My department manager balances concern for day-to-day details with projections for the future	.821
My department manager works hard at finding ways to help others be the best they can be	.821

Product reputation (CR = 0.834; AVE = 0.634; α = 0.827)	St. load
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The firm's products generally have a much higher price than its direct rivals for its reputation	.808
The brands' reputation of the firm pre-sells their products	.821
Firm's salespeople do not have to sell the products as they are already pre-sold by its brand image	.759

Social astuteness (CR = 0.836; AVE = 0.560; α = 0.826)	St. load
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I always seem to instinctively know the right thing to say or do to influence others	.736
I have good intuition or "savvy" about how to present myself to others	.734
I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others	.776
I pay close attention to people's facial expressions	.747

Social astuteness (CR = 0.861; AVE = 0.607; α = 0.837)	St. load
It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people	.724
I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me	.807
I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others	.806
I am good at getting people to like me	.777
Networking ability (CR = 0.841; AVE = 0.516; α = 0.806)	St. load
I spend a lot of time and effort t work networking with others	.703
At work, I know a lot of important people and am well connected	.808
I am good at using my connections and networks to make things happen at work	.623
I have developed a large network of colleagues and associates at work who I can call on for support when I really need to get things done	.685
I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others	.758
Apparent sincerity (CR = 0.816; AVE = 0.596; α = 0.822).	St. load
It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do	.752
I try to show a genuine interest in other people	.751
When communicating with others, I try to be genuine in what I say and do	.812

Political skill (CR = 0.911; AVE = 0.722; α = 0.849).	St. load
Social astuteness	.967
Interpersonal influence	.868
Networking ability	.727
Apparent sincerity	.819
Proactive behavior (CR = 0.947; AVE = 0.663; α = 0.944).	St. load
Initiated better ways of doing his core tasks	.769
Come up with ideas to improve the way in which his core task are done	.822
Made changes to the way his core task are done	.803
Suggested ways to make your sales team more effective	.832
Developed new and improved methods to help your sales team perform better	.862
Improved the way your sales team does things	.774
Made suggestions to improve the overall effectiveness of the organization (e.g. by suggesting changes to administrative procedures)	.796
Involved yourself in changes that are helping to improve the overall effectiveness of the organization	.801
Come up with ways of increasing efficiency within the organization	.864
Overall performance appraisal (CR = 0.805; AVE = 0.805).	St. load

Salesperson overall performance rating received in the last performance appraisal

.897