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Paradoxes in Leading Sales Productivity in Today's Sales Organisations

Abstract

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Paradoxes in Leading Sales Productivity in Today’s Sales Organisations

Enhancing sales productivity in an interconnected, digitalized and globalized marketplace has become a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with a number of inherent tensions and paradoxes that sales leaders need to respond to. For instance, the interplay between achieving short-term productivity versus building capabilities for long-term growth, or growing the business emphasising existing customer relationships versus new accounts, or the focus on salespeople’s performance versus learning.

A crucial question is, how should sales leaders deal with these paradoxes? This study pursued the identification of the key paradoxes or competing demands sales leaders face and how these are handled. To address this question, a qualitative study was conducted, involving a total of 36 senior sales executives (e.g. Sales Director, Sales Vice President, etc.), in interviews and focus group sessions.

Research findings showed that a number of dilemmas and paradoxes exist, that could be grouped into two major typologies: paradoxes in *leading the business*, and paradoxes in *leading sales people* (see table 1).

Leading the business	Leading the people
<p>The range of dilemmas sales leaders face when looking for ways to growing the business.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Top line growth versus profitability 2. Existing versus new customers and products/services 3. Smaller secure versus larger less secure deals 4. Efficiency versus effectiveness 5. Stability versus change 	<p>The various strategic choices that sales leaders take to engage individuals to enable their performance.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Autonomy versus control 2. Competition versus collaboration 3. Treat people in the same way versus differently 4. Attracting experienced salespeople versus young with high potential 5. People’s performance versus learning

Table 1. Sample of leadership paradoxes in sales.

The research also revealed that many of the paradoxes are strategic in nature, thus, requiring a leadership approach characterised by dynamic decision-making, building commitment to competing demands, multi-level learning and ability to embrace conflict (Smith, Binns and Tushman, 2010).

This study showed that often at the core of the paradox experienced in leading sales productivity is how one frames the paradox. Whilst a number of the dilemmas were perceived as incompatible in nature, some could be addressed adopting a paradox perspective that involves an acceptance of the ubiquitous nature of tensions, the coexistence of contradiction (Lewis & Smith, 2014) and a mindset that acknowledges the potential generative effect of handling competing demands.

I argue that leaders of today's sales organisations need to bring about a level of transformation in their organisations that enable these and their individuals to embrace ambiguity and paradox in mutually reinforcing ways.

The changing nature of professional selling is bringing new challenges for sales leadership and calls for a concerted effort to find new avenues in sales leadership research (Ingram, Laforge et al. 2005). The community of sales scholars and practitioners needs to start 'rethinking' sales leadership to enhance sales productivity in a new context, just as sales executives had to start to 'rethink' their sales forces (Rackham and de Vincentis 1999) more than two decades ago.

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