Prosocial behaviors of salespeople: an exploratory study

Paolo Guenzi
Department of Management
Bocconi University and SDA Bocconi School of management
Via Roentgen 1
Milan, Italy
paolo.guenzi@sdabocconi.it
+39 02 58366820

Federico Panzeri
Bocconi University

ABSTRACT

Prosocial behaviors increase the welfare of individuals, groups, or the organization as a whole. Examples are helping coworkers with business-related problems, suggesting organizational improvements, and representing favorably the organization to outsiders. We investigate what prosocial behaviors salespersons engage in, and analyze whether such behaviors have an effect on their relationship with customers. We use means-end theory and the laddering technique. Findings suggest that salespeople are particularly concerned with specific prosocial behaviors, and some of them indeed lead to the ability to drive customers' decisions. Finally, we provide some guidelines for future research on the topic and highlight several managerial implications.

KEYWORDS

Prosocial behaviors; salespeople; laddering

INTRODUCTION

Acts such as cooperating, helping, sharing, and volunteering are forms of prosocial behaviors. They are positive social acts meant to increase the welfare and integrity of others (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Prosocial behavior are similar to the notion of organizational citizenship behaviors, which are defined as extra-role discretionary behaviors intended to facilitate the effective functioning of organizations.

A significant knowledge gap exists about what kind of prosocial behaviors salespersons engage in, if any. The goal of this study is to address the following research questions:

RQ 1. *What prosocial behaviors do salespersons engage in?*

RQ 2. *How and to what extent do salespersons' prosocial behaviors affect the economic exchange with customers?*

To do this, we first review the literature on prosocial behavios and organizational citizenship behaviors. Then, laddering is the method chosen to investigate the research questions. It is an in-depth qualitative technique based on one-to-one interviews meant to reveal the full sequence of how one construct entails another construct in the mind of the respondent (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). The sample of respondents includes salespersons from three companies operating in different industries: lighting items, pharmaceutical, consumer goods. The end result of the empirical analysis is the hierarchical value map which provides a set of linkages among constructs in the mind of salespersons, following means-end theory (Gutman, 1982). The empirical analysis highlights the salience for salespersons of specific prosocial behaviors, in particular "persisting with enthusiasm and extra-effort" and "helping others". Furthermore, prosocial behaviors indeed appear to improve the economic exchange with customers, leading to the ability to drive the customer's decision. Nevertheless, customer

leadership seems to be mediated by personal achievements, namely extrinsic components of salesperson's motivation. A comprehensive set of implications is proposed, including suggestions for sales managers and salespersons, and possible avenues for further research on the topic.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Prosocial Behaviors and Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs)

Prosocial behaviors are positive social acts performed to produce and maintain the welfare and integrity of others (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). They include cooperating with colleagues, speaking favorably about the organization to outsiders, protecting the organization from unexpected risks and suggesting ways to improve its functioning. Many prosocial behaviors are extra-role since they are not formally stated as role requirements: examples of this are cooperating with others, suggesting organizational improvements, and so forth.

Prosocial behaviors may be performed towards individuals (coworkers or consumers of organizational products and services), groups or organizations as a whole.

Brief and Motowidlo (1986) provide a functional taxonomy of the main categories of prosocial behaviors, identifying thirteen different distinctions. Some examples are:

a. *Assisting coworkers with job-related matters.*
b. *Assisting coworkers with personal matters* such as family problems or emotional upsets.
c. *Providing services or products to consumers in organizationally consistent ways* i.e. selling a product to a consumer with the belief that the consumer will really benefit from the purchase, meeting the consumer's interests and needs.
d. *Helping consumers with personal matters unrelated to organizational services or products.*
e. *Complying with organizational values, policies, and regulations.*

f. *Suggesting procedural, administrative, or organizational improvements.*

g. *Putting forth extra effort on the job.* It is the essence of organizational commitment and encompasses the concept of conscientiousness.

h. *Volunteering for additional assignments.* It entails undertaking extra duties which might or might not be job-related with the intention of helping the organization.

i. *Staying with the organization despite temporary hardships.*

j. *Representing the organization favorably to outsiders, e.g.* by defending and speaking well of the organization to outsiders, with the aim of increasing the organization's reputation.

Prosocial behaviors are similar to organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs).

In fact OCBs are defined as individual behaviors that are "discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promote the effective functioning of the organization. By discretionary, we mean that the behavior is not an enforceable requirement of the role or the job description, that is, the clearly specifiable terms of the person's employment contract with the organization; the behavior is rather a matter of personal choice, such that its omission is not generally understood as punishable" (Organ, 1988a, p.4).

Therefore, the main differences are that prosocial behaviors can be either role-prescribed or extra-role, whereas OCBs by definition are extra-role (Organ, 1988), and that prosocial behaviors can be negative for the organization but positive for individuals, whereas OCBs necessarily have a positive impact on organizational performance.

According to Netemeyer et al., (1997), with respect to the selling context there are four relevant categories of OCBs: civic virtue, sportsmanship, conscientiousness, and altruism. Whereas the first three are directed toward the organization in general (OCBs-O), altruism (more broadly defined helping behavior) is directed towards individuals in the organization (OCBs-I).

Prosocial behavios, OCBs and performance

Prosocial behaviors can be labeled contextual activities, as opposed to task actitivities (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Task performance is the effectiveness with which individuals perform activities that contribute to the organization's core processes. Contextual performance comprises all those activities that are instrumental for organizational effectiveness in "ways that shape the organizational, social and psychological context that serves as the catalyst for task activities and processes" (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Research suggests that OCBs positively affect organizational success and increase overall organizational performance. Smith, Organ and Near (1983) and Organ (1988) noted that citizenship behaviors may contribute to organizational performance because these behaviors provide an effective means for managing the interdependencies between members of a team and, as a result, increase the collective outcomes achieved. Research also suggests that sales supervisors consider subordinates' contextual behaviors when evaluating their salespeople (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Podsakoff et al., 2000).

Drivers of prosocial behaviors

Generally speaking, prosocial behaviors are performed if salespeople possess the motivation and the capabilities needed to perform them.

As for the motivational variables, Staub (1978) posited three reasons why people may behave prosocially: to benefit others, to benefit themselves, and to comply with social and personal norms.

As for antecedents of interpersonal-focused OCBs (OCBs-I), research focused on the relational characteristics between the performer and the recipient, and on motives of performers (Rioux & Penner, 2001). As for relational characteristics, research suggests that

network centrality, i.e. an individual's degree of access to others within the organization, should be related to OCBs-I performance for a variety of reasons (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). First, central individuals are linked to more co-workers and thus will have more opportunity to help. Second, central individuals have greater control over information, making others dependent on them (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). As for motives behind OCBs-I, Rioux and Penner (2001) identified pro-social motives, organizational concern and impression management (i.e. avoid looking bad to colleagues).

Latané and Darley (1970) propose that a person's decision to engage in prosocial behaviors is based on a series of prior considerations that involve acknowledging the situation as one requiring help and support, deciding to take personal responsibility and deciding how to help. Burleson (2003) argued that motivational factors successfully predict whether a potential helper will offer assistance and to what extent, but they are not strong predictors of the quality of the helper's intervention.

In fact, Dudley and Cortina (2008) contend that knowledge and skills to help are the best predictors of the efficacy and appropriateness of the prosocial act, and therefore they identify five dimensions of knowledge and seven dimensions of skills leading to citizenship performance.

What variables influence the practice of prosocial behaviors?

Brief and Motowidlo (1986) define two dimensions of antecedents of prosocial behaviors: individual and contextual.

Individual antecedents refer to, for example, personality traits, education level, age.

Contextual antecedents include all those aspects of the organizational context and work environment that affect the practice of prosocial behaviors. They include, for example, norms, group cohesion, role models, reinforcement contingencies (e.g. reward system) and organizational climate.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Laddering

The laddering technique has its origins in Personal Construct Theory postulated by Kelly in 1955. Kelly argued that individuals generate models of their world by means of finite numbers of bipolar constructs that are hierarchically organized. These templates serve as the basis for making choices, according to the individuals' preferences for one pole over the other. In general, laddering refers to an in-depth, one-on-one interviewing technique used to uncover the full sequence of how one construct implies another construct in the mind of the subject (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). This technique consists in asking a series of probing questions designed to elicit the basic concepts or distinctions that individuals use to differentiate between the stimuli within the domain of interest. The interviewer then further the process by asking questions meant to uncover the higher-level meanings and associations related to these basic distinctions (Hinkle, 1965). These questions are open-ended, typified by the "Why is that important to you?" question, and designed to encourage the subjects to reply in their own words with respect to their specific thoughts.

This questioning process continues until the respondent can no longer provide an answer. Such technique is called laddering because it forces the interviewee up the ladder of abstraction, bridging basic concepts at the attribute level to more abstract meanings at the consequence and personal-value levels.

In fact the laddering method follows the Means-End Chain Theory (Gutman, 1982) insofar it has the explicit goal of determining sets of linkages between the key perceptual elements across the range of attributes (A), consequences (C), and values (V). Gutman (1982, p.60) defined Means-End Theory as follows:

"Means are objects (products) or activities in which people engage (…). Ends are valued states of being such as happiness, security, accomplishment. A means-end chain is a model

that seeks to explain how a product or service selection facilitates the achievement of desired end states".

The laddering method is typically employed to understand how customers differentiate between products. Recently, laddering has been satisfactorily employed in research in the selling context (e,g. Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, and Gobel, 2002).

Sample

Respondents are 14 salespersons with different background, working in three companies operating in different industries. The sample is made of five females and nine males with an average age of 38.2 years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample

	Male	Female	Total	Average Age
Lighting items	6	-	6	46,7
Pharma	1	2	3	41,9
Consumer goods	2	3	5	26,1
	9	5	14	**38,2**
	64%	**36%**		

Individual interviews lasted 50 minutes on average.

Data Collection

Following Reynolds and Gutman (1988) recommendations, one of the first and main issues to resolve concerns the interview environment. Respondents should feel at ease in order to facilitate them to be introspective and to look inside themselves for the underlying motivations behind their perceptions. Thus, interviewees are immediately ensured that there are no right or wrong questions, and that the purpose is just to understand how they see a

particular set of behaviors. Put simply, the interviewee is positioned as the expert, while the interviewer is positioned as a mere facilitator of the discovery process.

In this work, interviewees are first introduced with a general definition of prosocial behavior borrowed from Brief and Motowidlo (1986). Then a list of selected behaviors drawn from current literature is introduced to the subjects, along with a few examples aimed at simplifying the somewhat cryptic nature of the definitions. Below such behaviors are listed:

- *Persisting with enthusiasm and extra effort as necessary to complete own task activities successfully* (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997).
- *Volunteering to carry out task activities that are not formally part of own job* (George & Brief, 1992; Borman et al., 1985; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997).
- *Helping and cooperating with others altruistically (as opposed to egoistically)* (Piliavin et al., 1991; Cialdini et al., 1987; Batson, 1991; Martin, 1994).
- *Suggesting procedural, administrative, or organizational improvements* (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986).
- *Endorsing and representing the organization favorably to outsiders* (Graham, 1986; Brief & Motowidlo, 1986).
- *Sharing feelings, emotions, experiences and mental models with coworkers especially through face-to-face interaction* (Bennet, 2001; Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

After having described and exemplified these behaviors, respondents are asked to provide a preference order in terms of relative importance. Then, they are asked to tell why they prefer their penultimate behavior to their least preferred behavior, and so on up to their most

preferred behavior. This technique is an eliciting distinction that Reynolds and Gutman (1988) called “preference differences method”. The following example clarifies the technique.

> Interviewer: *I see that “Suggesting procedural, administrative or organizational improvements” is ranked as more important than “Endorsing and representing the organization favorably to outsiders”. May you explain why?*
> Respondent: *Well, probably because it is what mostly expresses the expertise of a salesperson…*
> Interviewer: *And why is that expertise important for your organization?*
> Respondent: […]

Their recommendation is to employ more than one of such eliciting distinctions in order to make sure no key elements are overlooked.
Therefore the interviewer called upon the “differences by occasion method” (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Respondents are thus presented with a personally meaningful context, created by the interviewer collecting pieces of information during the first half of the interview, within which to set the prosocial behaviors and then encourage the respondents to make further distinctions. Again, an example helps in understanding this second technique:

> Interviewer: *We previously talked about trust, specifically you told me that most of your customers entrust you and this is a very important asset for your job. Imagine working in an industry where business is made of countless transactions, not based on an ongoing relationship. How would you seize the trust of your customers, starting from this list of prosocial behaviors?*
> Respondent: *[…]*

This semi-free elicitation process is meant to understand whether the distinction is bipolar or not. The respondent is then asked which pole is closer to his/her working life, reinforced by the "Why is that important to you?" question. This procedure is integrated with other techniques such as *evoking the situational context* (e.g. "When did you socialize with a colleague last time?"), *third-person probe* (e.g. "Have you ever met a salesperson of another company who spoke favorably to you about his or her organization? How did you react?") and *age-regression contrast probe* (e.g. "Think back 15 years ago…have you ever had a peer colleague mentoring or helping you, even though he or she was not your manager?"). Eventually, there are two redirecting techniques that have been frequently employed, again borrowed from Reynolds and Gutman (1988). *Silence* on the part of the interviewer, that is used to force the respondent trying to look for a more precise or adequate answer. And *communication check*, a technique that consists in repeating back what the respondent has said asking for further clarification.

3. ANALYSIS

Content Analysis

The initial task of the analysis is to thoroughly content-analyze the transcript of each interview. The first step is to identify the ladders across respondents and to record the whole set on a distinct coding form. At this level of analysis it is important to keep every little piece of information and to avoid overlooking details that may become central to the analysis once a more complete picture will take form. In fact the following step is data reduction, that is the development of a set of summary codes which reflects the "chunks of meaning" (Krippendorf, 1980) highlighted in the ladders. In so doing, the codes are sorted into three basic A/C/V

(attribute – consequences – values) levels and a progressive number is assigned to each. Table 2 exhibits the codes together with a brief definition provided for completeness.

Table 2. Summary Content Codes

Values	***Definition***
(30) Customer Failure	Customers' performances below expected standards
(29) Customer Leadership	The ability to drive customers' decisions
(28) Self-Esteem	The confidence in one's own worth or abilities
(27) Personal Achievement	To acquire personal gains (material and immaterial) through job-related activites
Consequences	
(26) Learning	To gain knowledge by experience or by being taught
(25) Company's Goals Fulfillment	To reach the periodic targets the organization sets
(24) Trust	The customer's belief of the salesperson's reliability
(23) Professional Growth	To enhance oneself career path (not necessarily within the organization)
(22) Sense of Belonging	To become and feel as a part of the organization
(21) Reduced Time	A decrease in one's time availability
(20) Smartness	Having or showing intelligence
(19) Service	To be present, available and problem-solver to the customer
(18) Self-interest	To behave egoistically
(17) Socializing with Customers	To friendly interact with customers
(16) Technicality	To possess technical skills in accordance to the industry's standards
(15) Consulting	To provide information and advice to customers
Attributes	
(14) Cheerleading	Endorsing and representing favorably the organization
(13) Commitment	To believe in the products/services the organization commercializes
(12) Curiosity	To show the desire to know or learn something
(11) Empathy	To understand and share the feelings of another
(10) Helping	To provide assistance and help to a coworker upon his/her request
(9) Information Sharing	To share information with a coworker
(8) Organizational Loyalty	To remain into the organization despite hardship
(7) Persisting	To keep up with extra efforts
(6) Providing Advice	To voluntary provide advice to a coworker (even if not requested)
(5) Risk Sharing	To fully committ oneself (with own resources) to the organization's course of action
(4) Constructiveness	To proactively suggest organizational improvements
(3) Volunteering	To get involved in extra-activities even if not linked with individual assignments
(2) Team Working	To collaborate with every individual within the organization
(1) Socializing with Colleagues	To socialize with salespersons of others' companies playing in the same industry

Overall, 30 codes were identified: 14 attributes, 12 consequences, and 4 values.

Table 3. Raw Data from Interviewees

Respondent Ladder	Content Codes				
1	2	25	27	0	0
2	8	25	27	0	0
3	2	22	28	0	0
4	10	22	28	0	0
5	6	26	29	0	0
6	8	22	27	0	0
7	12	20	29	0	0
8	13	15	24	26	29
9	7	25	27	29	0
10	3	16	26	29	0
11	14	23	27	0	0
12	3	17	24	29	0
13	11	24	29	0	0
14	7	25	27	0	0
15	7	18	23	27	0
16	10	26	27	0	0
17	11	17	24	29	0
18	6	26	27	0	0
19	13	24	29	0	0
20	9	23	27	0	0
21	14	23	27	0	0
22	9	26	27	0	0
23	1	26	27	0	0
24	5	25	27	0	0
25	9	16	26	27	29
26	1	16	26	27	29
27	10	21	30	0	0
28	7	18	23	27	0
29	13	25	29	0	0
30	14	25	29	0	0
31	8	25	29	0	0
33	9	17	25	29	0
34	12	17	25	29	0
35	7	19	24	25	29
36	11	23	29	0	0
37	10	23	27	0	0
38	13	15	24	26	29
39	4	17	24	25	29
40	4	17	24	25	27
41	2	22	25	28	0
42	10	17	22	28	0

Next, the numbers assigned to each code are used to score every element in each ladder, yielding a matrix with rows representing an individual respondent's set of ladders (thus multiple rows for each respondent) with the sequential elements within the ladder corresponding to the consecutive column designations (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Table 3 shows the forty-two ladders generated by the fourteen respondents, with each row indicating

the number of the codes involved. On average, each respondent provided 3 ladders. This is consistent with Reynolds and Gutman (1988), who stated that typically two or three ladders can be obtained from roughly three-fourths of the respondents interviewed, while approximately one-fourth of the respondents cannot go beyond one ladder.

In Table 4 the absolute and relative frequencies of citations of each code are counted and listed.

Table 4 . Frequencies

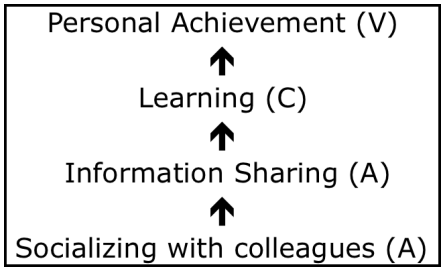
Codes	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
(30) Customer Failure	1	1%
(29) Customer Leadership	20	14%
(28) Self-Esteem	4	3%
(27) Personal Achievement	19	13%
(26) Learning	10	7%
(25) Company's Goals Fulfillment	14	10%
(24) Trust	9	6%
(23) Professional Growth	7	5%
(22) Sense of Belonging	5	3%
(21) Reduced Time	1	1%
(20) Smartness	1	1%
(19) Service	1	1%
(18) Self-Interest	2	1%
(17) Socializing with customers	7	5%
(16) Technicality	3	2%
(15) Consulting	2	1%
(14) Cheerleading	3	2%
(13) Commitment	4	3%
(12) Curiosity	2	1%
(11) Empathy	3	2%
(10) Helping	5	3%
(9) Information Sharing	4	3%
(8) Organizational Loyalty	3	2%
(7) Persisting	5	3%
(6) Providing Advice	2	1%
(5) Risk Sharing	1	1%
(4) Constructiveness	2	1%
(3) Volunteering	2	1%
(2) Team Working	3	2%
(1) Socializing with colleagues	2	1%

Implication Matrix

The next step is to build a matrix that exhibits the number of times any element leads to any other element. Practically speaking it consists in defining what elements in a given row precede other elements in the same row in Table 3. Operationally, the procedure is accomplished by sorting the second column in ascending order and then checking which

elements follow the elements just arranged. The process continues likewise up to the last column. The final outcome is a square matrix depicting two types of relations: direct relations and indirect relations. Direct relations denote "implicative relations among adjacent elements" (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

The following ladder exemplifies the concept:



The *"Socializing with colleagues – Information Sharing"* relation is a direct one, as it is *"Information Sharing – Learning"* and *"Learning – Personal Achievement"*. However, in order to fully represent the overall map of aggregate relations it is useful to track relations such as *"Socializing with colleagues – Learning", "Socializing with colleagues – Personal Achievement", "Information Sharing – Personal Achievement"*. These relations are all indirect ones, and are of fundamental importance in order to determine what paths are dominant and to examine the strength of ladders. In building the implication matrix both the direct and indirect relations have been considered: in fact direct relations account only for 55% of total relationship, while Gengler and Reynolds (1995) recommend a threshold of 75%. Furthermore, each relation was counted only once in order to prevent bias in aggregate results (Gengler & Reynolds, 1995).

Table 5 presents the Summary Implication Matrix, that is the row-column frequency matrix specifying the number of times all row elements directly and indirectly lead to all column elements (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). The numbers are indicated in fractional form with

direct relations to the left of the decimal and indirect relations to the right of the decimal. For example "*Socializing with colleagues*" (element 1) leads to "*Learning*" (element 26) one time directly and one time indirectly. Likewise "*Team Working*" (element 2) leads to "*Sense of Belonging*" (element 22) two times directly and zero times indirectly, and so on. The diagonal of the implication matrix is empty because no concept can be followed by itself (Pieters et al., 1995).

The table provides also information about the in-degrees and out-degrees (Scott, 1991). The out-degree of a code is the number of times that the code is the origin of a connection with other concepts. It corresponds to the row sum in the matrix. The in-degree of a code is the number of times that the code is the destination of a connection with other concepts. It equals the column sum in the matrix. It is noteworthy to highlight the importance of *"Customer Leadership"* (29), that is the element with the most elements leading to it. Among consequences, "*Company's Goal Fulfillment*" (25) is notable for having a high frequency of elements leading from them as well as into them.

Elements are sorted in ascending order according to their abstractness index. Abstractness (Pieters et al. 1995) of a code is defined as the ratio of in-degrees over in-degrees plus out-degrees of the same code. It ranges from 0 to 1. The higher the index is, the larger the proportion of a code's connections with other codes in which the code is the destination rather than the source (Pieters et al., 1995). Codes with a high abstractness score are basically ends, whereas codes with a low score are more often than not means.

The abstractness score is useful to decide which elements sort respectively as consequences or values, given the fact that attributes are obviously totally concrete. It is common practice to set the beginning of values when the abstractness score register a sharp leap. In the implication matrix, the gap between *Learning* (0.59) and *Personal Achievement* (0.94) is broad enough to delineate the border between the two levels of abstraction.

Table 5. Summary Implication Matrix

Abstractness		15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	Out-degrees
-	1 Socializing with colleagues		01.00										01.01	00.02		00.01		02.04
-	2 Team Working								02.00			01.00		00.01	00.02			03.03
-	3 Volunteering		01.00	01.00							00.01		00.01			00.02		02.04
-	4 Constructiveness			02.00							00.02	00.02		00.01		00.01		02.06
-	5 Risk Sharing											01.00		00.01				01.01
-	6 Providing Advice												02.00	00.01		00.01		02.02
-	7 Persisting	01.00			02.00					00.02	00.01	03.01		00.04		00.03		06.11
-	8 Organizational Loyalty								01.00			02.00		00.02		00.01		03.03
-	9 Information Sharing		01.00	01.00						01.00		00.01	01.01	00.03		00.02		04.07
-	10 Helping							01.00	02.00	01.00			01.00	00.02	00.02		00.01	05.05
-	11 Empathy			01.00						01.00	01.01					00.03		03.04
-	12 Curiosity			01.00			01.00					00.01				00.02		02.03
-	13 Commitment					02.00					01.02	01.00	00.02			00.04		04.08
-	14 Cheerleading									02.00		01.00		00.02		00.01		03.03
0,14	15 Consulting										02.00		00.02			00.02		02.04
0,27	16 Technicality												03.00	00.02		00.03		03.05
0,30	17 Socializing with customers										04.00	02.02		00.01		00.05		06.08
0,33	18 Self-interest									02.00				00.02				02.02
0,40	19 Service										01.00	00.01				00.01		01.02
0,50	20 Smartness															01.00		01.00
0,50	21 Reduced Time																01.00	01.00
0,50	22 Sense of Belonging													01.00	04.00			05.00
0,56	23 Professional Growth													06.00		01.00		07.00
0,57	24 Trust											03.00	02.00	00.01		02.04		07.05
0,59	25 Company's Goals Fulfillment													06.00		09.00		15.00
0,59	26 Learning													06.00		04.02		10.02
0,94	27 Personal Achievement															03.00		03.00
1,00	28 Self-Esteem																	00.00
1,00	29 Customer Leadership																	00.00
1,00	30 Customer Failure																	00.00
	In-degrees	01.00	03.00	06.00	02.00	02.00	01.00	01.00	05.00	07.02	09.07	14.08	10.07	19.25	04.04	20.38	01.01	105.92

Hierarchical Value Map

The central stage of the analysis is the construction of the hierarchical value map (HVM), a tree-like network diagram that is the common output of a means-end study (Gutman, 1982). An HVM is a graphical representation of a set of means-end chains describing an aggregate cognitive structure map (Gengler et al., 1995). For the sake of simplicity the term "chain" will be used to describe such sequences of elements emerging from the aggregate implication matrix, whereas "ladder" will continue to refer to elicitations from individual respondents (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). An HVM consists of nodes and lines that link these nodes. The nodes represent the attributes (A), consequences (C) and values (V) drawn from the implication matrix. The line segments connecting these nodes stand for the associations between these concepts.

The first step in building in an HVM is to set a cutoff level and to map all relations above such threshold. The goal of the researcher is to maintain informative richness while at the same time guaranteeing ease of interpretability, thus avoiding a cluttered HVM with several crossing lines. There are several criteria to take into account when deciding the appropriate cutoff level:

- To keep at least 2/3 of the relations among elements (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988)
- To keep at least 70% of the linkages identified in the implication matrix (Gengler & Reynolds, 1995; Guenzi & Troilo, 2006)
- Every concept must be mentioned at least by 5% of respondents (Gengler et al., 1995; Klenosky et al., 1993; Guenzi & Troilo, 2006)

Other researchers stated that there are no theoretical or statistical criteria to select a cutoff level (Grunert & Grunert, 1995) while others (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) suggest a trial-and-error approach trying multiple cutoff levels and choosing the one that leads to the most informative and interpretable solution.

Pieters et al. (1995) recommend to choose the cutoff level that account for a large percentage of the total number of connections that subjects made between concepts with a relatively small number of cells in the implication matrix. In order to make such a decision they argue for defining the following information:

- *Number of active cells*: it is the total amount of non-zero cells at the selected cutoff level.
- *Number of active cells as a proportion of all cells*: it is the ratio between the number of active cells at the selected cutoff level and the total amount of (non-diagonal) cells.
- *Number of active cells as a proportion of all cells mentioned at least once*: it is the ration between the number of active cells at the selected cutoff level and the number of active cells corresponding to a cutoff value of 1.
- *Number of active linkages*: it represents how many connections between concepts are retained when non-active cells are ignored.
- *Number of active linkages as a proportion of all linkages*: it is the ration between the number of active linkages at the selected cutoff value and the number of active linkages corresponding to a cutoff value of 1.

Table 6. Statistics for determining a cutoff level

Cut-off	Number of active cells	Number of active cells as a proportion of all cells	Number of active cells as a proportion of all cells mentioned at least once	Number of active linkages	Number of active linkages as a proportion of all linkages
1	95	20%	100%	197	100%
2	52	11%	55%	154	78%
3	21	5%	22%	92	47%
4	13	3%	14%	68	35%

Considering Table, 6 it comes naturally to consider a cutoff value of 2 as the most suitable. In fact, at this level it is possible to account for 78% of all connections made by subject using only 11% of all possible cells in the implication matrix and only 55% of the cells that contain a non-zero entry. Besides, these results are also in close agreement with the heuristic rule of thumb given by Reynolds and Gutman (1988).

As previously mentioned the input for the construction of the HVM is Table 5. The procedure requires to start from the first row and to find out the first value at or above the arbitrary cutoff level (2). The first significant value is "*Socializing with colleagues – Learning"* (1; 26) with a value of 01.01 indicating 1 direct relation and 1 indirect relation between these two elements. Next, the procedure implies to move to the 26th row (corresponding to the number of the column previously identified) and to find again the first value at or exceeding the cutoff level. In the example it is *"Learning – Personal Achievement"* (26; 27). The process continues until the end of the chain, in this case leading to the chain "1 – 26 – 27 – 29". The final step is to go back to the beginning and to inspect again every row seeking for other values at or above the cutoff value that have not been considered yet. The aim is to possibly add further branches to the chain.

Once this procedure has been replicated for each row, a comprehensive set of chains will result. In this case thirteen chains have been obtained and subsequently mapped in Figure 3. The HVM here employed follows the Gengler et al. (1995) model. They enhanced the design of the map and increased the amount of information conveyed through:

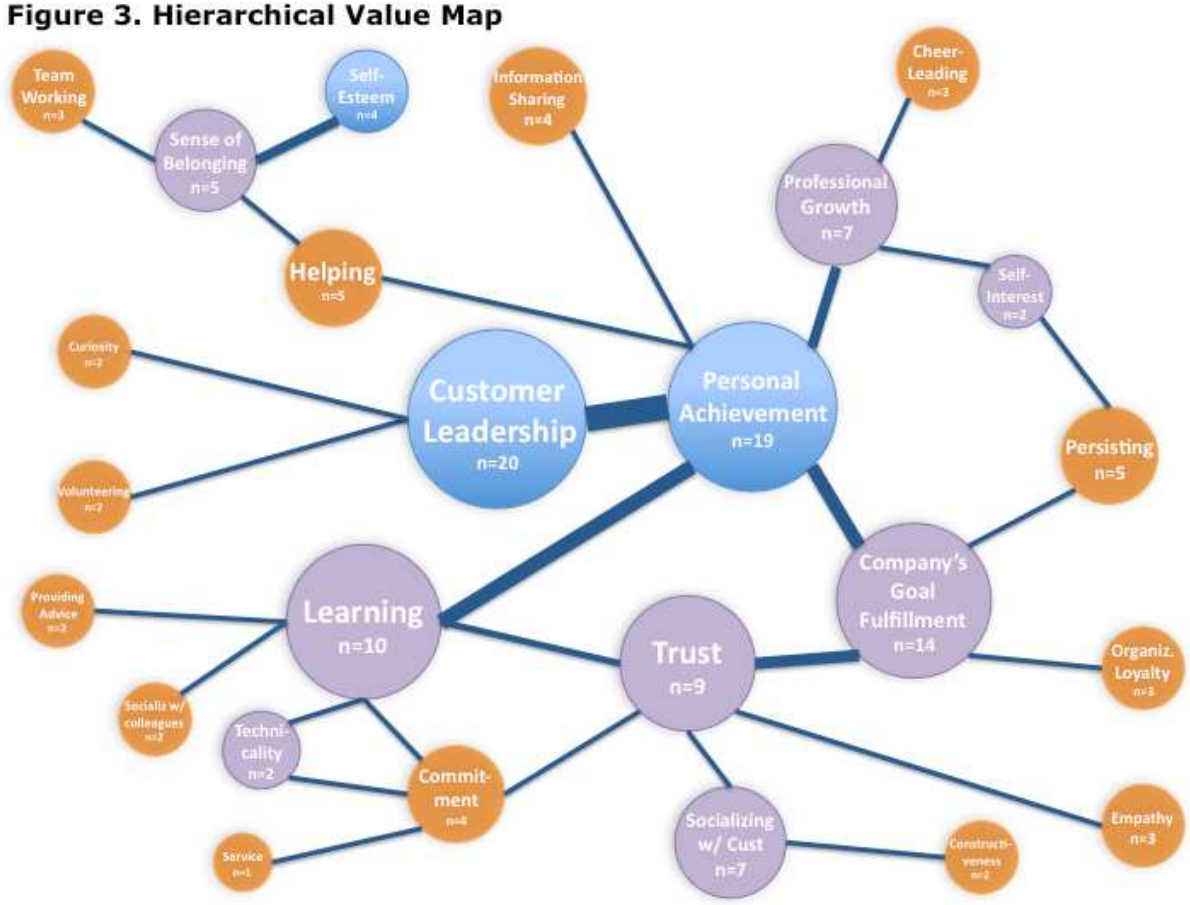
1) The use of a centralized format to reduce the clutter caused by crossing lines. By doing this, values are placed at the center of the HVM while attributes are located in the least-central position.

2) A clear identification of the level of abstraction (attributes – consequences – values). A color is assigned to each hierarchical value (orange attributes, violet consequences, light blue values) in order to make the map easy-to-read.
3) The illustration of the relative number of subjects who mentioned a concept or made an association between concepts. This is accomplished by indicating the relative frequency below each element and by varying the area of the circle accordingly. Besides also the relative frequency of associations between concepts is graphically depicted by scaling the width of the lines used to connect the circles.

Starting from the HVM it is possible to make some initial considerations:

- *Customer Failure* is not depicted: its connections did not reach the cutoff value, therefore were excluded. This means that prosocial behaviors are not significantly related to failures in the buyer-seller relationship in the respondents' minds.
- *Self-Esteem* is a marginal value compared to the centrality of *Customer Leadership* and *Personal Achievement.* This means that prosocial behaviors lead to concrete end states, not only related to the person but also and with more intensity related to the business.
- There is an extremely strong association between *Customer Leadership* and *Personal Achievement:* the relation account for 76% of all chains in the HVM.
- Only two attributes, namely *Volunteering* and *Curiosity*, are directly related to *Customer Leadership*, whereas all the other chains leading to it are mediated by *Personal Achievement.*

Figure 3. Hierarchical Value Map



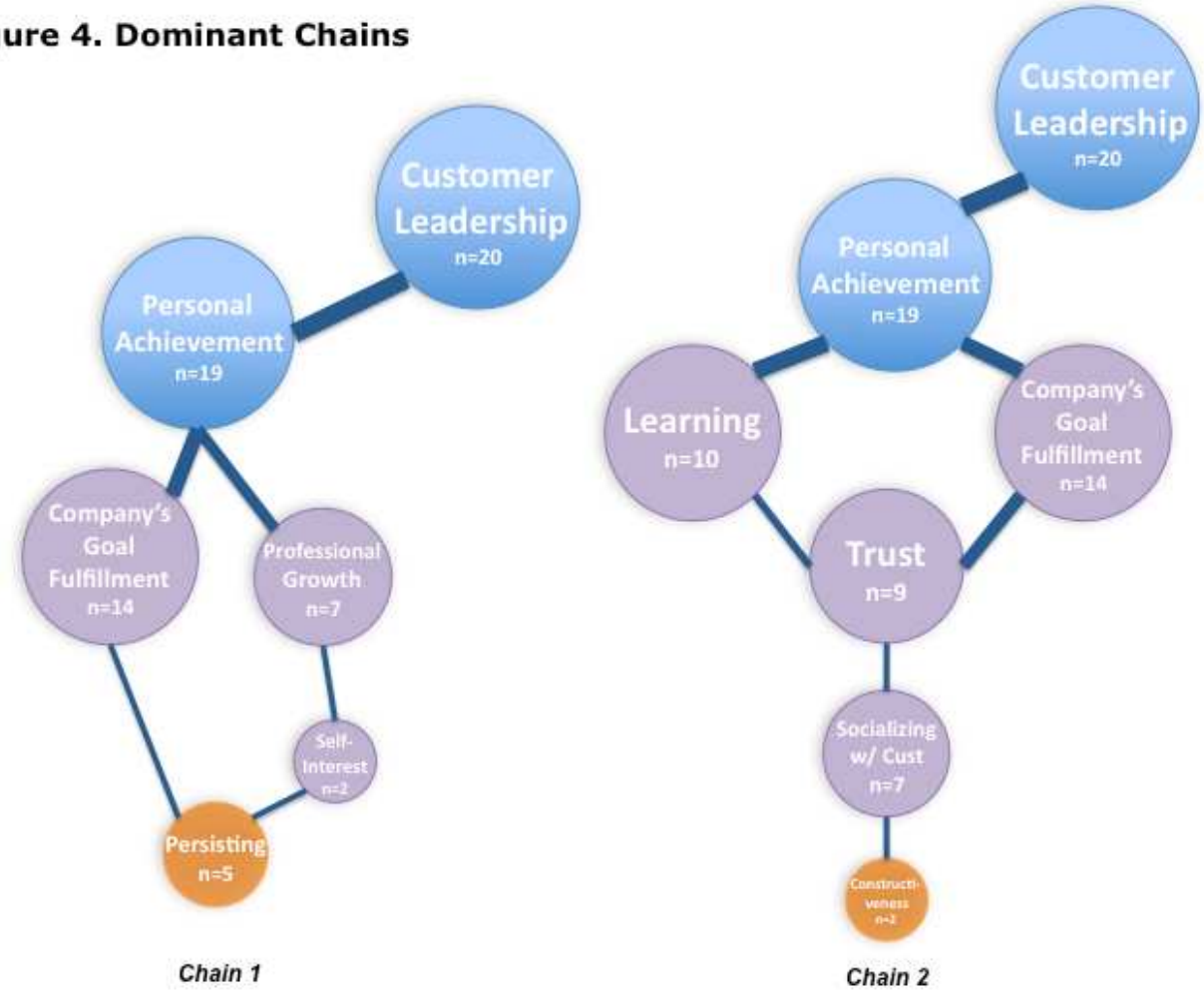
The analysis can be improved by identifying Dominant Chains. Dominant chains are pathways, from one attribute to one value, that best translate the means – end process of a large number of respondents (Aurifeille & Valette-Florence, 1995). The definition and choice of the dominant chains is accomplished by comparing all the chains in the HVM, either intuitively, by considering the number of direct and indirect relationships between the chain's items (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988), or mathematically, by summing all these relationships (Gengler & Reynolds, 1989).

Aurifeille and Valette-Florence (1995) propose two criteria to determine the dominant means – end chains: 1) a frequency criterion (the number of ladders that are represented by a chain) 2) a representativeness criterion (the degree to which a chain accurately represents the underlying set of ladders).

Importantly, the choice of the dominant chains must be directed towards the labels that are most consistent with the research purpose. Among values, the most relevant is undoubtedly *Customer Leadership,* that is the actual terminal value that this paper aims to clarify. Nevertheless, *Personal Achievement* almost always mediates *Customer Leadership,* thus it has been involved into the selection.

The choice of dominant chains started from values (*Customer Leadership*) following a top-down approach. Only direct relations exceeding the cutoff value of 2 have been counted, in order to provide straightforward chains in an easy-to-read fashion. Moreover the sizes of the circles and the widths of the associations are kept as in the HVM. Figure 4 and 5 exhibit the four dominant chains that have been selected.

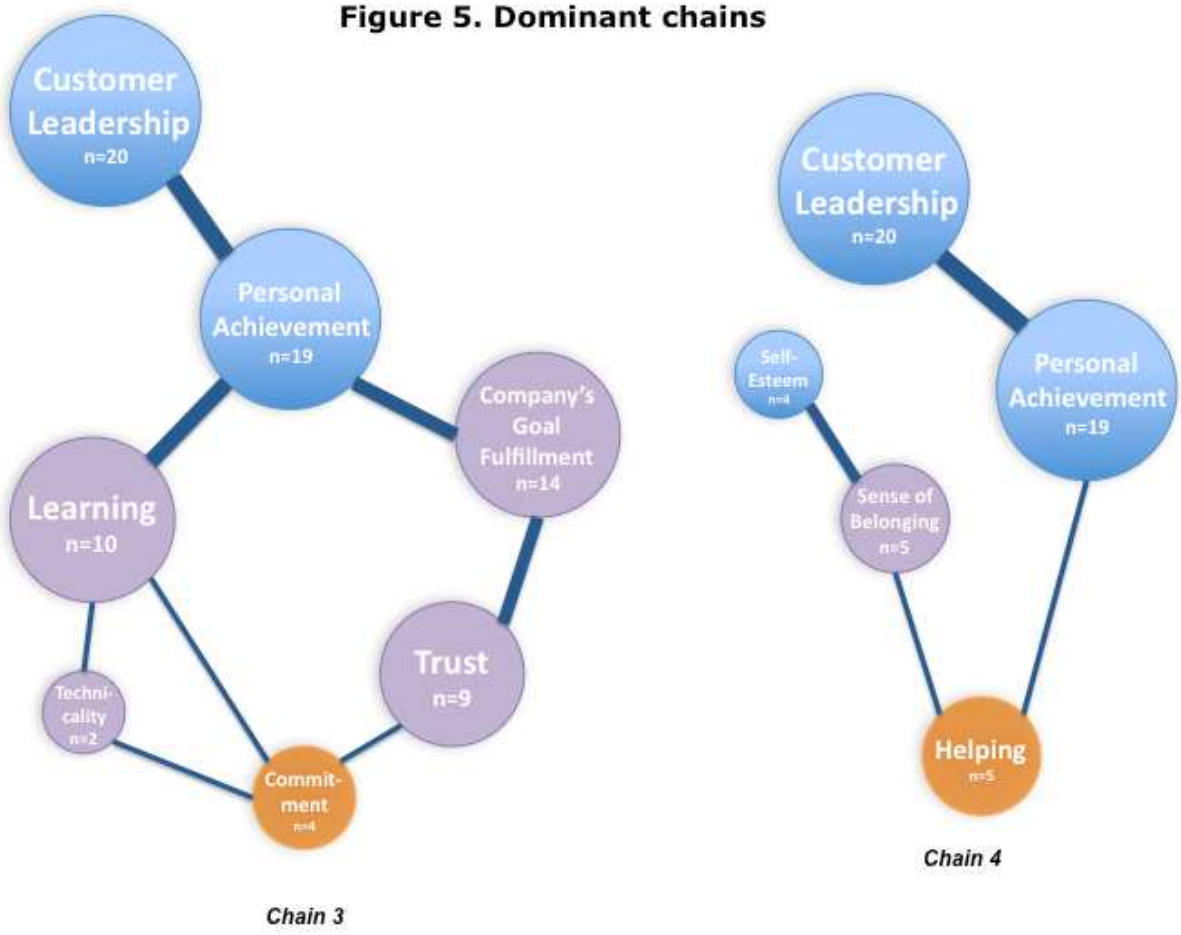
Figure 4. Dominant Chains



Chain 1 is relevant for several reasons. First, it stems from *Persisting* that is one the two most cited prosocial behaviors (see Figure 2). “Persisting with enthusiasm and extra effort as necessary to complete own task activities successfully” (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986) is considered a pivotal behavior in order to succeed with customers and to gain recognition from sales managers. On the one hand, it leads to *Company’s Goals Fulfillment* and to *Personal Achievement*. Hence the successful accomplishment of company’s goals is mostly viewed as a way to gain monetary rewards, while the following linkage with *Customer Leadership* is considered as a mere consequence. This is consistent with the salesperson’s interpretation of his/her job. On the other hand, *Persisting* leads to *Self-Interest* and *Professional Growth*, which refers to the salesperson’s evaluation made by sales managers.

Chain 2 arises from *Constructiveness*, which is the equivalent to “Suggesting procedural, administrative, or organizational improvements” (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Salespersons may provide positive suggestions to the organization because they are the bottom of the pyramid, they know better than anybody else the market dynamics and they are face-to-face with customers and competitors, which allows a broad collection of feedbacks and cues. Suggestions are to some extent utilitarian, because they are meant to increase the welfare of the salesperson, or the sales force as a whole, to increase the relationship quality with customers. This is why *Constructiveness* leads to *Socializing with Customers*, which is supposed to be an essential requirement to enhance the relationship quality. Moreover it is in turn fundamental to gain the customer’s *Trust.* Trust allows the salesperson to learn about the company’s customers and meet the company’s goals.

Figure 5. Dominant chains



Chain 3 starts from *Commitment,* which is a prosocial behavior not formally included in the initial set submitted to respondents. However, it can be associated to a concept in Brief and Motowidlo (1986) taxonomy, i.e. "Providing services or products to consumers in organizationally consistent ways"**.** Chain 3 is therefore notable because it has arisen a prosocial behavior even though this behavior was not clearly stated to respondents. *Commitment* has a path similar to the one characterizing the previous chain, except for the linkage *Commitment – Technicality – Learning*, which is eventually leading to *Personal Achievement* and *Customer Leadership*. Respondents stated that *Commitment* implies to fully believe in the products they sell. Thus, *Commitment* entails to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of products, technical aspects above all, which are essential to effectively argue with customers.

Chain 4 has its origins in *Helping*, which is the most cited attribute together with *Persisting*. A twofold target characterizes *Helping*. In fact, the values to which it leads are both *Customer Leadership*, mediated by *Personal Achievement*, and *Self-Esteem.*

On the one hand, it reinforces the salesperson's *Self-Esteem* through an increase of the *Sense of Belonging* to the team. Moreover, *Helping* is the only attribute passing the cutoff level that is able to describe this terminal value.

On the other hand, the direct linkage from *Helping* to *Personal Achievement* recalls the notion of impression management (Goffman, 1959). Impression management is the "process by which individuals present information about themselves to appear as they wish others to see them" (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). A popular taxonomy of impression management tactics is offered by Jones and Pittman (1982), which includes five dimensions. Among them, the exemplification tactic clarifies the *Helping – Personal Achievement* linkage: salespersons enact behaviors that make them appear like model employees, going above and beyond the requirements of the job. Thus, *Helping* seems to be a mere quest of some extrinsic rewards, consistent with the egoistic and utilitarian view of some salespersons' engagement in prosocial behaviors.

4. DISCUSSION

Most of the considerations that follow are extracted from the hierarchical value map in Figure 3. In fact, the starting point is the acknowledgement that Customer Leadership is the code with the highest frequency (n = 20). It reflects on the one hand the structure of the interviews, specifically designed to get to that point, and on the other hand the theoretical affirmation of the role of prosocial behaviors not only to increase the employees' welfare but to get more effectively to the market as well.

However, *Personal Achievement* almost always mediates the path: it is rare that a code goes straight to *Customer Leadership*. This notion partially supports what Strutton and Pelton

(1998) argued, namely that “salespeople always have personal goals, and the pursuit of these goals is sometimes inconsistent with long-range organizational interests”. Actually salespeople do always have personal goals, and the role of Personal Achievement seems to validate the idea. However, Personal Achievement is not the terminal value of the HVM, instead it is an intermediate value connecting Customer Leadership. In this fashion, it is hardly provable that the ability to drive customer’s decisions is inconsistent with long-range organizational interests, on the contrary it is one of the most pivotal factors to ensure the organization’s leadership in the market. The key is to identify what behaviors leading to individual goals continue up the ladder reaching Customer Leadership, and it is there that sales manager are advised to focus their efforts.

Before focusing on Figure 4 and 5, whose objective is to examine the dominant chains, the HVM readily provides an information: there are two chains that skip the consequence-level of abstraction and from attributes are capable to reach directly the value Customer Leadership. They are *Curiosity* and *Volunteering*. While *Curiosity* is a personality trait, *Volunteering* is a prosocial behavior (George & Brief, 1992). When salespeople voluntarily engage in activities that are not formally part of their job they are not in the quest of extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic motivation comes into play and brings the willing salesperson directly to the terminal value. This idea validates the previous recommendation about trying to focus salespersons’ motivation on its intrinsic component. However this is not an easy task, given the natural predisposition of salespersons towards extrinsic motivation. In addition, findings show that *Volunteering* has been cited only twice. This is to say that a full commitment in stimulating intrinsic motivation may be fruitless, and sales managers would be better off in focusing on extrinsic components while at the same time trying to make them more aware of the importance of intrinsic motivation.

Learning is a focal code to understand prosocial behaviors. Looking back at the HVM, it appears clearly how learning occupies a critical position: it is one of the most central and it has the second highest frequency among consequences. According to Sujan et al. (1994) salespersons may have two distinct goal orientations: learning and performance. Learning orientation entails an intense desire to enhance and master one's selling expertise and capacities (e.g. Dweck & Leggett, 1988). At the opposite end there is performance orientation, that views good performance as a means to attain extrinsic rewards from supervisors (e.g. Ames & Archer, 1988).

Sujan et al. (1994) describe these two orientations as two distinct dimensions, following a dichotomous approach: a salesperson is more concerned with one of the two goal orientations that will influence and motivate his or her work behavior accordingly. They stated that on average, a performance orientation is likely to lead to short-term pay offs, whereas a learning orientation is likely to improve skills and competences leading to enhanced long-term performance. Although the prominent study by Sujan et al. (1994) is a milestone in understanding goal orientations, the present study surfaces a rather contrasting difference. In fact, such dichotomy does not seem to fit the reality: in this research learning is a pivotal concept but intrinsic elements of motivation, that should made up this orientation, are scarce, as previously analyzed. Extrinsic components, recognition seeking above all, are the principal motivators of salespersons in the sample.

The explanation is rather simple: learning implies working smarter (Sujan et al., 1994) but it is just a means to achieve extrinsic awards, recognition from supervisors and peers in primis. Therefore, sales managers are suggested to invest in training programs focused on technical aspects of their range of products (*Technicality*) and on negotiation skills. Salespersons should fully exploit the opportunities a training provides and exchange information and advice one another when practicing in their routine (*Providing Advice*). The outcome of this

process will be the consolidation of salespersons' learning orientation, which is fed up by constant feedbacks by sales managers conveyed in an extrinsic manner. This combination seems to be very likely leading to the ability to drive customer's decisions.

Chain 2 describes the path starting from *Constructiveness* up to *Customer Leadership.* Along this way *Socializing with customers* (e.g. Geiger & Turley, 2005a) was frequently and interestingly mentioned. Some respondents described a travel they experienced several times both in the past and recently. It involved all the salespersons that reached a predefined target of sales, and all the customers that purchased a predefined volume of goods in a given period. On top of them, the management and the ownership participated and coordinated the activities and the various trips organized on site. This is a typical example of socialization with clients in an out-of-office environment (Geiger & Turley, 2005a), leading to a wide array of relational and business catalysts that prolong their effects even once back home. Respondents agree with the views that social bonding increases trust (Doney & Cannon, 1997), communication (Boorom et al., 1998), friendliness (Jap et al., 1999) and intimacy (Sharma et al., 1999). The recommendation to sales managers may be to think about arranging out-of-office events that involve both the salespeople and their customers. Such events do not require expensive travels abroad and do not have to be necessarily tied to the attainment of predefined targets: low-cost social occasions, such as a charity dinner, a theatre show, a concert, a sport match are all examples of situations where the buyer-seller interaction may change completely perspective.

The role played by *Trust* is fairly predictable: if a customer entrusts a salesperson, then deeper interpersonal bonds have already come into play, leaving room for the salesperson to influence the customer's actions. Hence it is a powerful construct for the salesperson to succeed. Scanning the attributes leading to *Trust* confirm what has just been stated: *Empathy* is functional to lower the customer's defenses, *Socializing with customers* (derived from

Constructiveness, see chain 2) is central to strike and gain his/her intimacy, and *Commitment* (see chain 3) is a facilitator factor.

Finally, two considerations summarize the main concepts of this paragraph.

First *Personal Achievement* almost always mediates the path to *Customer Leadership*. The interpretation of this phenomenon embraces most of the assumptions emerged so far. Sales managers are advised to provide salespersons with skills, notions, and capabilities through adequate training programs, and arrange a compensation system based on extrinsic rewards tied to potential extra efforts the individual could bring forth. In so doing, sales managers should bear in mind that all of these practices would firstly lead to the salesperson's own welfare, but it will in turn improve the overall effectiveness of the company to the market.

Second, prosocial behaviors appear to be instrumental to improve the work life of salespersons as well as to enhance their selling performances. Thus prosocial behaviors are not only directed internally to the organization but reflect themselves into the market as well. The most recurrent concept in the mind of salespersons is *Company's Goals Fulfillment*. This finding justifies a management's significant allocation of efforts and resources onto this subject, because it seems to prove its contribution to the economic performance of the firm. This is the reason why nurturing prosocial behaviors represents a powerful weapon for companies to improve their overall structure, producing a combination of positive effects directed both within and outside the boundaries of the organization.

5. LIMITATIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research presented here is exploratory. Thus, future research may use the findings of this work as the inputs for a quantitative study. The attribute-value identified in our study provide several cues for building a comprehensive survey to test our preliminary findings on a large-scale. Future research on the topic should also consider individual variables such as personality traits and demographic variables.