Cross-Cultural Differences in salespeople’s Negative Feedback Seeking Behaviour: Effects of Friendship and Job Status

Introduction

In the management literature, giving employees feedback about their job performance is widely recognized as an essential element of supervisory behaviour. However, most sales managers find it unpleasant to deliver negative feedback due to the fear of difficult future interaction and negative reactions (Larson, 1989). Thus, it is essential to discover appropriate ways to motivate sales personnel to seek out negative feedback from their work environment. This is particularly important for employees that spend significant time outside the office as their line managers are not frequently involved in joint visits (Spiro, Rich, and Stanton, 2008). When a salesperson fails to close a call, his or her manager may not be fully aware of the situations and the causes leading to the negative performance of the salesperson, unless this salesperson is motivated to seek negative feedback from his or her supervisor. Thus, it is necessary to identify factors contributing to negative feedback seeking behaviour among salespeople.

Moreover, as discovered by Hofstede (1983a, 1983b), management theories appear culturally sensitive and we cannot take the cultural environment for granted. In this light, the study of feedback seeking behaviour should also be considered in different cultures to reveal the impact of culture on feedback seeking behaviour to examine whether factors applicable in the West are also valid in a Chinese context. The paper aims to explore issues relevant to negative feedback seeking behaviour among salespeople in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Western countries. It will investigate whether antecedents of negative feedback seeking behaviour are different across cultures and attempts to provide firms in the global marketplace with insights on how to motivate salespeople and manage negative feedback across different cultures.

Negative Feedback

Negative feedback seeking behaviour refers to an effort to obtain information about inadequacies in work behaviour and work performance (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Moss, Valenzi, & Taggart, 2003). For employees to make effective use of self-regulation to build better work relationships and, indeed, simply to survive in organisations, they must build on negative feedback to understand their ineffective behaviour and performance and make corrections accordingly (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). However, various researchers have suggested that employees may not behave rationally by seeking negative feedback because they believe that negative feedback may hurt their self-esteem and make their weaknesses more salient (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; Trope & Neter, 1994). Yet, with no negative feedback, individual salespeople may not be able to adjust and direct their efforts to match the challenge they are facing (Bandura, 1991; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Festinger, 1954; Locke & Latham, 1990). For instance, individual salespeople may attribute causes of their failure to the external environment and persist in using their ineffective approach for
handling other sales calls (Badovick, Hadaway & Kaminki, 1992). Thus, it is essential to identify factors contributing to negative feedback seeking behaviour.

**Leader-member exchange, interactional justice and negative feedback seeking**

In the management literature, the impact of supervisory, or leadership, behaviour on subordinates’ performance is widely emphasised. Leadership behaviour can be conceptualized by the leader member exchange (LMX) theory (Dansereau et al., 1975).

- This theory describes how leaders develop a unique relationship, the so-called LMX relationship, with each of their subordinates.
- Moreover, it shows that a leader’s behaviour can vary between different dyads of leader and subordinate.

However, to-date, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which subordinates use negative feedback-seeking behaviour to help them reciprocate, and enhance their work performance (Chen, Lam, and Zhong, 2007). Moreover, interactional justice is another construct that may give rise to high quality LMX and hence negative feedback seeking behaviour. Masterson et al. (2000) empirically found that employees’ interactional justice perceptions is positively related to their performance, supervisor-directed citizenship behaviour and job satisfaction. In addition, they also discovered that the direct relationships between interactional justice perceptions and supervisor-directed citizenship behaviour and job satisfaction are mediated by LMX. Thus, arguably, we foresee that there may be a relationship between interactional justice, LMX and negative feedback seeking behaviour.

Despite a body of research in this area, such work tends to have been undertaken in the Western context. As such, whether findings pertaining to the specific feedback-seeking motives can be generalized to other cultures remain an important research question (MacDonald, 2008). Thus, we aim to explore and examine the aforementioned relationship among LMX, interactional justice and negative feedback seeking behaviour in different cultures.

**Propositions generation**

Regarding the relationship between interactional justice and leader-member exchange, various researchers (Erdogan, Liden & Kraimer, 2006; Masterson, et al. 2000; Murphy, et al. 2003) have found a positive relationship between the two constructs. Thus, in light of these previous findings we posit that:

*Proposition 1: Salespeople’s interactional justice perceptions will be positively related to the quality of LMX*

As negative feedback has been found to have higher instrumental value than positive feedback in the context of performance enhancement (Ashford et al., 2003; Audia & Locke, 2003; Morrison, Chen, & Salgado, 2004; Moss et al., 2003), we propose that salespeople’s behaviour in directly asking for negative feedback from their immediate supervisors may facilitate the social exchange process between supervisors and subordinates. Thus the following proposition is offered:
Proposition 2: The quality of LMX mediates the relationship between salespeople’s interactional justice perceptions and negative feedback seeking behaviour.

Analyses of the studies in Chinese cultural values show that, people tend to maintain the harmonious interpersonal relationship with in-group people. If these sales people do not make an effort to repay their in-group supervisors, their relationship will become difficult and social harmony will become difficult to sustain (Hsu, 1971). Friendship should be a moderator that can strengthen the relationship between Chinese salespeople’s interactional justice perceptions and the quality of LMX. Thus, we propose that:

Proposition 3: In the Chinese context, the positive association between salespeople’s interactional justice perceptions and the quality of LMX is stronger the more (less) that supervisors are treated as in-group (out-group) people of the salespeople.

As implied by Bond (1991), Chinese sales people, when communicating with their in-group supervisors, will need to do the so-called ‘facework’ to protect or save their supervisors’ face. It is not unreasonable either for Chinese salespeople to seek negative feedback from their in-group supervisors in order to give face, and hence maintain a long-term harmonious and hierarchical relationship. In other words, even if the quality of the leader-member exchange is moderate, Chinese salespeople will still seek negative feedback from their supervisors. Thus, we propose that:

Proposition 4: In the Chinese context, the positive association between the quality of LMX and the negative feedback seeking behaviour is stronger the more (less) that supervisors are treated as in-group (out-group) people of the salespeople.

According to Yang (1993a and 1993b), Chinese people are authority worshippers and authority dependent. Relatively speaking, Chinese strongly believe that those holding high job titles will have higher authorities in the companies. If the supervisors have high job status, salespeople will seek negative feedback from them even when LMX is of moderate quality. Through this lens we posit that:

Proposition 5: In the Chinese context, the positive association between quality of LMX and the negative feedback seeking behaviour is stronger the more (less) that supervisors have high (moderate) job status.

On the whole, it is possible that negative feedback seeking is conducive to improved performance, at least in part because such behaviour can enhance the quality of the relationship between employees and their immediate supervisors. Hence, we posit that:

Proposition 6: Salespeople’s negative feedback-seeking behaviour mediates the relationship between quality LMX and work performance.

Finally, based on the overall discussion presented, we finally conclude by proposing that:

Proposition 7: There is a positive causal relationship from sales representative’s performance to his or her job satisfaction.
References:


