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Co-Creating Sales Management Curricula with Practitioners -Insights on Competencies for Future Sales Managers

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CO-CREATING SALES MANAGEMENT CURRICULA WITH PRACTITIONERS - INSIGHTS ON COMPETENCIES FOR FUTURE SALES MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic field of sales is experiencing a transformation, necessitating a nuanced approach to sales management education. Sales managers must adeptly navigate operational and leadership challenges in a landscape marked by advanced technology, evolving generational expectations, and seismic geopolitical shifts. This research employs an exploratory workshop methodology to identify the core competencies required of future sales managers, aiming to bridge the gap between academic rigor and industry relevance. Through the engagement of 20 industry professionals, the study delves into comprehending the multifaceted role of sales managers, who are often catapulted from successful sales roles into managerial positions without pertinent leadership training. The findings underscore the necessity for a curriculum that harmonizes practical skill sets with theoretical groundwork while prioritizing personal traits such as ethical conduct and resilience. The study recognizes the challenges posed by globalization, compliance demands, and generational diversity in the workforce, revealing that while market understanding and customer insights remain vital, the effective management of internal and external environmental changes is crucial for future-oriented sales leadership. The proposed curriculum, derived from workshop insights, reflects a synthesized perspective tailored to contemporary sales management exigencies with direct implications for the industry. Limitations due to the focus group size and geographic scope signal the need for more extensive research, including diverse stakeholder viewpoints, to enrich the education paradigm for aspiring sales leaders.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of co-creating curricula with practitioners in higher education and training. This recognition is rooted in the understanding that practitioners possess valuable industry knowledge and expertise that can significantly enhance the relevance and effectiveness of educational programs (Zhang & Jin, 2010). Moreover, involving practitioners in curriculum development fosters a collaborative approach, where academia and industry join forces to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Taylor & Bovill, 2017). By collaborating with practitioners, educators can ensure that the curriculum aligns with the current industry demands and equips students with the necessary competencies and skills required to succeed in sales management (Bridgstock et al., 2019). When building new curricula, it is crucial to identify the specific competencies and skills required in the sales industry. To do so, it can be meaningful to include practitioners in the process of determining what competencies are needed for future graduates. Therefore, the collaborative nature of co-creating curricula with practitioners is essential to address this gap and better prepare students for careers in sales management. Studies supported by both practitioner and academic sources identify major gaps between practice and curricula in higher education (Spiller et al., 2019; Vriens et al., 2019).

As the business-to-business environment has progressively changed within the past decade, this requires updating sales curricula in the European educational system to sufficiently accommodate new skills and competencies in selling and sales management (Nielson et al., 2021; Spiller et al., 2020). Changes in the B2B environment occur inside sales organizations and in customer relations; external changes include changes in buying patterns and purchasing behavior (Cuevas, 2018). In addition, internal changes include the rapid acceleration of technology (Bongers et al., 2021) and changes to the workforce, like an increased focus on wellbeing (Dugan et al., 2023). These changes have forged a series of changes to the role of salespeople (Bongers et al., 2021). As roles and tasks for salespeople are changing, so are those of sales managers. This poses challenges to the educational system, in which the salespeople and sales managers of the future are to be educated.

Traditional sales management courses might include teaching elements such as "Sales effectiveness" (Cravens, 2012), Training and Rewards (Johnston, 2012), "Structuring the sales force" (Zoltners et al., 2012b), "Designing sales territories" (Zoltners et al., 2012a), "Salesperson behavior and motivation," "Salesperson performance and recruitment" (Johnston & Marshall, 2022), and while these are still relevant and essential elements of Sales Management practices, the role of a sales manager is evolving. New technologies such as AI tools can support many traditional sales management tasks (see, for instance, the Sales Tesch Landscape). This leaves the sales managers with new tasks, such as bridging the human-technology collaboration (Alavi & Habel, 2021) and ensuring individual, organizational, and societal well-being (Dugan et al., 2023). To do this, future sales managers need different competencies. These new competencies needed are, e.g., technological capabilities such as data analytics or hybrid selling (Johnston & Marshall, 2022). Other competencies might include negotiating in complex situations (Alavi & Habel, 2021; Bages-Amat et al., 2020; Schäfer et al., 2023) and more. Reports from Gartner and McKinsey (Bages-Amat et al., 2020; The Future of Sales in 2025: A Gartner Trend Insight Report, 2020) demonstrate the need for close collaborations with industry to ensure that educational curriculum is aligned with the needs and demands of the industry. From an educational perspective, this poses the relevant question of what to teach, what to include in sales curricula for future sales leaders, and how to include industry in curriculum development.

2 SALES CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Sales curriculums in higher education are routinely developed with input from industry professionals, including senior-level sales executives (Luthy, 2007). The decision to pursue sales education is influenced by students' appreciation for creativity, people skills, and their interests and abilities (Allen, 2014). However, there is a need for a more customer-oriented approach to sales education (Allen, 2014). There is a call to expand sales education at universities and a need to understand sales programs' curriculum offerings and teaching practices (Spiller, 2020) to better focus sales education programs on the needs of industry.

3 CO-CREATING CURRICULA WITH PRACTITIONERS

The concept of co-creating curricula, particularly in higher education, has gained traction recently (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; Taylor & Bovill, 2018). This approach involves, for instance, students and academic staff working together to design and develop the curriculum to enhance the learning experience (Taylor & Bovill, 2018). The success of this approach is contingent on the conceptualization of the curriculum and the position of the learner within it (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; Taylor & Bovill, 2018), making the scoping of educational and didactic reflections essential to the development of new curricula. Despite the challenges, co-creating curricula have been found to align with several principles of good practice in undergraduate

education (Taylor & Bovill, 2018). Furthermore, integrating community partners in co-creation is beneficial, particularly in tourism pedagogy (Boluk et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019). Several approaches have been presented to participants in the co-creation process, such as involving students (Bao et al., 2023; Hero & Lindfors, 2019), parents (E. et al., 2023), and industry partners (Shrivastava et al., 2022; Amante & Fernandes, 2022). Amante and Fernandes present that higher education has adapted to the increasingly globalized and digital world by opening partnerships with local businesses beyond internships. This opening has clearly benefited stakeholders and even positively affected the national economy. While much of this research has focused on the co-creation of short-term learning, our goal was to co-create the entire curriculum for a part-time bachelor-level sales manager education, based on the idea that selling education is already in place at both bachelor (part-time) and master level (full time) (www.ufm.dk). However, specifically, sales management education is scarce, and due to the large number of sales managers, especially in SMEs, who often do not have formal education, the need for specialized sales management education for this demographic is evident. Since sales managers are already working, the program would have to be part-time to allow them to continue in their profession while acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge in sales management.

An often-perceived struggle with curriculum generation is the schism between academic rigor and industry relevance (Shrivastava et al., 2022). This should not be considered an either/or prospect. However, the aim is to give appropriate managerial backup and attention to participant fatigue, achieving a relevant curriculum while adhering to the rigor of taxonomy possible. In the case study, the co-creation process involves industry partners and points to several key factors that are instrumental in overcoming the rigor vs. relevance schism, such as support from senior management, the capability to recruit suitable industry partners, preparatory work to identify levels of industry involvement and strong relationships with executive champions in partner organizations. The case study presents a matrix that plots curriculum content on the two axes of Theoretical abstraction and Organizational relevance. This matrix allows for a systematic approach to balancing academic rigor and industry relevance in the cocreation of the curriculum (Bovill & Woolmer, 2018)

In a 2007 study (Cone & Woodard, 2007) focusing on real gains for PepsiCo and its customers, it was found that using different learning modalities, including blended learning and action learning, as well as learning through actual and relevant practice, helped to develop business acumen and innovation skills for sales leaders. Arndt et al. (2014) present a study focusing on the industry relevance side of this argument by examining what a curriculum should include to lead to a performance benefit in the early stages of the student's sales career. The key findings are that a sales curriculum should include questioning and customer orientation skills. Moreover, while skills such as adaptive selling are critical, the study did not find an immediate performance benefit. Other papers, such as Pierce (2019), focus on the existing curricula offered by educational institutions and list suggestions on relevant topics to include. The study included a comprehensive survey regarding the inclusion of various sales-related topics. It found that the top reasons for this inclusion were the high demand from the industry for qualified salespeople and a positive employment outlook. The study's key findings are detailed as an extensive list of eight essential skills recommended to be incorporated into a sales curriculum. These skills are crucial for individuals looking to excel in sales, offering a valuable foundation for success in the competitive sales environment. By integrating these skills into training programs and educational curricula, aspiring sales professionals can enhance their abilities, adapt to market demands, and build a strong foundation for a successful career in sales. A similar focus on the actual career benefit of a sales education is taken by (Knight et al., 2022) in a study that investigates the preparedness of graduates of a sales education. While they

found graduates to have confidence in and report benefits from their understanding of the sales process, they also found that graduates were less prepared to handle rejection and maintain perspective and confidence. In summary, research suggests that a comprehensive sales curriculum should include a combination of theoretical knowledge and technical skills and focus on industry relevance and curricula development.

4 TOWARDS A NEW SALES MANAGEMENT BACHELOR PROGRAM

In the Danish educational system, few programs offer dedicated sales education (www.ufm.dk). In part-time education, there are no existing programs for sales management. One nationally offered education offers a specialization in sales and marketing, but there is a need for a more comprehensive and specialized bachelor's degree program in sales management. This paper addresses this need by proposing co-creating a new sales management bachelor's degree program in collaboration with industry practitioners and educational institutions. The specific goal of this case was to investigate what to include in a new part-time bachelor's degree in Sales Management. We conducted a facilitated workshop with a co-creation process involving sales executives to achieve this goal. Through this collaborative approach, the workshop aimed to gather insights and input from industry practitioners regarding the knowledge, skills, and competencies that should be included in the curricula.

To ensure an inclusive curricular development process, a workshop was hosted with the collaboration of 20 seasoned professionals from the realm of sales management. This workshop aimed to amalgamate practical insights with academic perspectives, thereby shaping a robust curriculum for sales management education suitable for European higher education institutions. The workshop was meticulously designed to adhere to the following parameters:

- Duration: Allocated 1 hour and 45 minutes
- Participants: Engaging approximately 20 distinguished sales leaders, trainers, supervisors, or CEOs who possess profound expertise in fostering sales capabilities (Table 2)
- Goal: To elucidate the competencies and practical wisdom essential for sales leaders' flourishing in the dynamic business landscape.

5 METHODOLOGY

This single case study is based on a collaborative workshop with industry practitioners. The workshop was advertised via LinkedIn to potential interested parties in Denmark. An invitation was distributed via the local chamber of commerce (appendix 1). To incentivize practitioners to participate in the program, the workshop included three elements: 1) An update from sales researchers on current sales research results, 2) The collaborative facilitated co-creation session, and 3) a networking lunch.

Our research team, with extensive knowledge and a passion for sales management, was responsible for facilitating this workshop. Mindful of potential challenges, we made a conscious effort to avoid dominating the discussion. We aimed to create an environment where the depth of participant knowledge could enhance our collective understanding, ultimately optimizing the curriculum design process. Recognizing this, we commissioned an external facilitator to facilitate the workshop. This decision was informed by the need to cultivate unimpeded dialogue amongst the expert attendees. Drawing inspiration from prominent theorists such as Karl E. Weick and Frank J. Barrett, we envisaged the workshop as an improvisational 'jam session.' This approach was intended to steer the contributors towards a collaborative gestation of

insights, exploiting their advanced practitioner sagacity and aptitude for creativity and intuition in fostering new paradigms of understanding (Weick, 1995; Barrett, 2012).

The interplay between tacit knowledge and explicit inquiry was integral to the workshop's success. The facilitator, a novice in sales, instantiated a beginner-expert dynamic, which necessitated her to elicit participants' expert responses through objective probing, thereby allowing their nuanced experiences to enrich our academic inquiries. This paradigm, drawing on the scholarly work of authors such as Nonaka & Takeuchi, and Polanyi, valorizes the implicit knowledge that practitioners possess, which often remains unarticulated but is critical to expertise (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1967).

Establishing a small structure is also present in the process through which participants shape their improvisation. The facilitator made a short slideshow with four slides, each with a selected theme:

- A good sales leader
- Most essential challenges for sales leaders today
- Focus when developing leadership talent
- Preferred organizing of a sales leader education

Each theme had two questions, one about the theme in general and one designed to unlock participants' practical experience and the sharing of concrete examples that could serve as deliberate initiatives to activate thinking and sensemaking (Weick, 1995, s. 90-1). About the first theme, the questions looked like this: What is the most essential characteristic of a good sales leader today? Describe an example of how you create value as a leader in your organization today. Instructions for the process were identical for each slide. Participants were to grab post-its and pens on the table, brainstorm the questions for 3-5 minutes, and then reveal their contributions to each other before engaging in explorative dialogue. After 10 minutes, the facilitator broke off the dialogue to gather the main points collectively and disrupt groupthink (Janis, 1971). This was inspired by a process known as the "turn-and-learn," which is designed to counter socio-psychological processes that lead to cognitive bias, such as the "bandwagon effect," where we become uncritical of a statement because we think that everyone thinks this, or the "halo-effect, where we tend to agree with people of high status (Brown, 2018). These processes are important as sensemaking and creative improvising depend on interruptions (Weick, 1995). Giving participants questions and these instructions corresponds to giving jazz musicians a jazz standard, key, and tempo and asking them to perform. The key is to provide just enough structure to ensure that participants constitute a system but not so much that the system exceeds a loose coupling and overdetermination manifests (Weick, 1998, s. 543). During participants' improvisation, it is key that the facilitator manages to balance interruptions when the energy and creativity lessen and guidance when divergence becomes too great and destroys participants' "sense of cohesion" (Antonovsky, 1987). In this, the facilitator plays the band leader role, ensuring navigation and pressure of a "steady beat" (Berliner | Weick, 1998, s. 543).

6 RESULTS

Based on the workshop, several insights about future demands for sales managers were uncovered (Appendix 1).

Future Sales Manager Characteristics

The workshop determined that the most crucial characteristic of a sales manager for the future, from a practitioner perspective, can be summed up by four themes: 1) Leadership and wellbeing, 2) Shifting focus from KPIs, Targets, and commissions to Meaning, Purpose, and Empowerment, 3) Facilitating teamwork and learning and 4) Clear, concise communication skills and transparency

Leadership style and wellbeing

The first theme centers around the leadership style and well-being of the employees. Among the characteristics mentioned for future sales managers, there was a great emphasis on Empathy and emotional intelligence, especially the ability to create a psychologically safe and trusting environment in which there is room for the empowerment of the employees and significant autonomy for the sales team. Also, according to the practitioners, creating purpose and meaning in the team is vital. Finally, creating room for work-life balance is essential. This indicates that the role of the sales manager is evolving towards a different role, in which the focus is not only on achieving sales targets but also on creating a positive work environment and supporting the well-being of the sales team, which is in alignment with a current stream in selling and sales management literature focusing on wellbeing and stress or burnout in sales organizations Dugan et al. (2023), Hartman et al. (2023), Hartman & Lussier (2020). This is a significant change in focus in sales management and will require sales managers to develop these skills. These sales managers will need to shift their focus away from simply driving sales targets and towards creating a positive work environment, supporting the wellbeing of their salespeople. They must be empathetic, emotionally intelligent, and capable of creating a psychologically safe and trusting environment.

Shifting focus from KPIs, Targets, and commissions to Meaning, Purpose, and Empowerment

The second theme identified is centered around shifting the focus of sales managers from key performance indicators, targets, and commissions to meaning, purpose, and empowerment. This means that future sales managers should prioritize creating a sense of meaning and purpose in the work of their sales team members rather than solely focusing on hitting financial targets. They should empower their sales team by giving them autonomy and the freedom to make decisions, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Additionally, this shift in focus requires sales managers to develop a new set of skills, such as active listening and effective communication, to understand better and meet their sales team members' individual needs and aspirations. The practitioners highlight the importance of courage in leadership and the ability of the sales manager to create a vision, inspire their team towards that vision, and make the necessary decisions, even when it is complex and controversial. (Longenecker et al., 2014). Finally, ensuring that all team members are onboard and included in the team is an essential task for the sales manager.

Facilitating teamwork and learning

The third theme that emerged is the importance of facilitating teamwork and fostering a culture of continuous learning within the sales organization (Rangarajan et al., 2021). Sales managers must prioritize creating a collaborative and supportive team environment where individuals can learn from each other and grow together (Longenecker et al., 2014). The practitioners mentioned this as an essential component in sales management. Specifically, the practitioners emphasized the need for sales managers to encourage knowledge sharing and that the sales management should become a trusted sparring partner to their salespeople, working alongside them as partners in achieving their goals. On an individual level, the sales manager must support dedicated salespeople and make sure there is room for failure, learning from mistakes,

and personal development. Finally, the sales manager must secure room for innovation and initiative from salespeople.

Clear, concise communication skills and transparency

The fourth theme is clear communication. The practitioners emphasized transparency and chose to inform and include salespeople by sharing information. This includes providing clear expectations, objectives, and feedback, as well as keeping sales team members informed about changes in the organization or industry that may impact their jobs.

Contemporary Sales Management Challenges

The co-creation session included questions on the current significant challenges in sales management. These challenges focus primarily on leader competencies and prioritization of time and resources. While this has always been a significant focus for sales managers, the practitioners highlighted three specific challenges that are particularly relevant in the current business environment:

Leader prioritization and competences

A significant concern for the participants in the workshop is that sales managers need to effectively prioritize their time and resources to address the evolving needs and challenges of the sales organization (Rangarajan et al., 2021). Practitioners claim that sales managers often have multiple responsibilities and tasks competing for their attention, such as managing sales performance, coaching and developing the sales team, and aligning with strategy. Moreover, while all tasks are essential, the practical everyday operations of selling, such as budgeting, managing, and having meetings, seem more dominant than leadership tasks, such as creating and managing the work environment and supporting the individual salesperson. This is, according to the participants, probably due to the fact that great salespeople are typically promoted to sales managers. While they might be excellent and competent salespeople, there are no guarantees that the most excellent salespeople are great sales managers and leaders. In short, there seems to be a great deal of lacking competencies in the leadership aspects of the job. So, while these managers understand the sales process and how to become great salespeople, they might be unable to lead others. This creates a situation in which some sales managers might choose to focus on what they are already good at, and this creates an uneven focus on selling operations instead of leading the organization. Also, the constantly increasing load of tasks and responsibilities, as the tasks are accumulative, means that the new and future sales managers must comply with the abovementioned tasks and traditional tasks. This creates a situation in which it becomes complex and difficult to prioritize. While becoming a true leader is more necessary than ever, there seem to be difficulties.

Changes in society and environment

Another very contemporary and prevailing issue is that of new generations entering the job market. Generation Z has new and different priorities and expectations for their sales manager, which creates friction between managers and their employees.

Geopolitical issues are also a significant concern. At the same time, the global covid-19 pandemic has already been heavily researched regarding its influence on selling and sales management, e.g., the rapid acceleration of technology that followed, along with a fundamental change in buying preferences. Other geopolitical issues, such as the 2008 economic crisis and the current war in Ukraine, have significantly impacted sales and sales management practices. Likewise, the 2023 supply-chain crisis has been a significant factor. These changes significantly challenge and shock sales organizations.

Compliance and Internal issues in the sales organization

Internally, sales organizations are facing an increasing demand for compliance with regulations on data protection, sustainability, and risk management, which also creates challenges in sales operations.

Market and customer understanding

It is understanding the market and customers. Including the buying journey and purchasing decision-making is a critical factor in successful selling and sales management, and while this is not new by any standards, in further research or practice, it continues to be an issue for many companies.

Traits of the Future Sales Manager

As part of the workshop, the practitioners were able to pinpoint critical personal traits in future sales managers. These included being engaged, structured, action-oriented, and having good values. Specifically, the practitioners emphasized ethical and moral behavior and being able to do the right thing in challenging circumstances. While these are essential traits, they are also potentially complex to "teach" and put in a curriculum.

7 CONCLUSION

Bridging the rigor vs. Relevance gap in developing the Curriculum

The above insights offer a range of relevant topics to consider when developing a sales manager curriculum. Translating the results into the curriculum requires bridging the rigor and relevance gap. Not all the identified themes and traits desirable for the future sales manager are equally teachable. There is a need to balance the inclusion of rigorous academic content with practical and applicable knowledge to meet the demands of the sales industry. This includes a sharp prioritization and further development from education in translating insights into curricula. In this case, we have developed a range of courses based on the insights. These courses and the program include the aspects warranted by the workshop (appendix 2).

8 DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is a single case study with one co-creative workshop in one country with 20 participants. This means that the results are indicative of those 20 people's opinions. Also, the framing for the workshop was to determine what competencies and abilities future sales managers should possess in order to develop a new solid curriculum for part-time education. The participants all signed up based on an invitation, suggesting that they were already interested in and aware of the need for a change in sales management teachings moving forward. The limitations of this study include its small sample size, limited geographical scope, and potential bias in participant selection. Future research could expand the sample size and geographical scope to include a more diverse range of participants from different industries and countries. Furthermore, conducting follow-up studies to assess the effectiveness of implementing the suggested changes in sales management education would provide valuable insights for further improvements.

Additionally, the study focused on the perspective of sales managers and did not include input from other stakeholders such as salespeople, students, customers, or industry experts. Future research could benefit from including the perspectives of these stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the competencies and abilities needed for sales managers in the future.

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