

Lone Wolf Tendency and Ethical Behaviors in Sales: Examining the Roles of Perceived Supervisor Support and Salesperson Self-Efficacy

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Executive Summary

The sales profession has gone through and continues to undergo notable changes, including digital transformations and customer complexity. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified these changes as well as create new approaches to buying and selling. As a result of the changing sales landscape, and to meet the new and complex demands of today's selling role, modern salespeople are further expected to work closely with not only their external customers, but also internal customers (such as fellow salespeople and coworkers in other departments). For some salespeople, particularly those with a lone wolf tendency, this reality may be particularly challenging given their preferred working style. It is well-known that lone wolf salespeople prefer to work independently, prioritize their own interests, and are prone to focus on outcomes rather than on processes. As a result of this working style and the possible frail internal relationships with coworkers, as well as the constant pressure that salespeople face, there may be a conceivably increased temptation for lone wolf salespeople to behave less ethically.

Toward that end, in this research the authors take an important step towards establishing the impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors, which may be an indirect precursor to other downstream job-related outcomes. In addition, the authors identify and examine factors that influence the impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. Drawing from both ethical decision-making theory and social cognitive theory, the authors predicted that the negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors will be mitigated by supervisor support yet exacerbated by salesperson self-efficacy.

The results based on a survey-based dataset consisting of 135 business-to-business salespeople lends support to the study hypotheses. To further confirm the results and capture first-hand perspectives, a set of interviews with professional salespeople was collected. The interviews not only corroborate the quantitative study results, but also underscore the concern with lone wolf salespeople if they are left to completely operate on their own.

Our research has several important implications for practice. First, managers should scrutinize the activities of salespeople who prefer to work alone and in solitude, particularly as it relates to ethical conduct. Second, managers should involve lone wolf salespeople in various team-based activities and have periodic coaching sessions to provide ongoing dialogues to discuss any ethical dilemmas that may arise. Third, managers should proactively offer lone wolf salespeople with support, make themselves more available, and set clear and explicit guidelines with regards to acceptable behaviors. Finally, managers should recognize that high levels of self-efficacy may be problematic for lone wolf salespeople and offer more pinpointed coaching and monitoring to guard against these salespeople engaging in fewer ethical behaviors.

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