

THE EFFECT OF FORGIVENESS ON SALESPERSON ATTITUDES AND OUTCOMES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Salespersons must effectively cope with stress to avoid its adverse consequences on the salesperson, the employer, and customers. This paper presents a conceptual framework investigating the effect of forgiveness on outcomes important to salespersons and sales management. This framework suggests that forgiveness can be viewed as a resource that reduces the salesperson's negative affect and other reactions to excessive stress while enhancing their job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance, and customer orientation. Testable propositions are developed, and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: Forgiveness, salesperson performance, stress, customer retention, burnout, turnover

INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness has drawn increased attention from researchers recently (Booth et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2015; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Fincham & May, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2020; Sanchez-Gonzalez et al., 2015; Smith, 2012; Thompson & Simkins, 2017; Toussaint et al., 2019; Tsarenko & Otnes, 2019; VanderWeele, 2018; Webb et al., 2017) and suggest important implications for salesperson effectiveness. Forgiveness has been found to have positive associations with less stress, better relationship quality, psychological health, and physical health (Booth et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2015; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Fincham & May, 2019; Sanchez-Gonzalez et al., 2015; Smith, 2012; Thompson & Simkins, 2017; Toussaint et al., 2019; VanderWeele, 2018; Worthington et al., 2007). These outcomes, in turn, are associated with less absenteeism, less turnover, and greater productivity. Each of these issues have received considerable attention in the marketing and sales literatures. However, with few exceptions, the marketing and sales literatures lag the organizational, management, and psychology literatures in addressing forgiveness and its impact on outcomes of interest to marketing and sales professionals and researchers.

Much of the research concerning forgiveness in a business setting focuses on customers forgiving customer facing employees (Bath & Bawa, 2020; Chaker et al., 2021; Harrison-Walker, 2019; Tsarenko et al., 2019). Little attention has focused on customer facing employees, such as salespersons, forgiving the coworkers, superiors, suppliers, and customers with whom they regularly interact. Maintaining high quality customer relationships is an important organizational outcome that can depend upon a healthy functioning salesforce. Salespersons are often the primary point of contact for customers, however stressful working conditions may sabotage efforts to carry out their duties properly, eventually leading to turnover and burnout. Burnout has been recognized as an especially critical problem for customer contact employees such as salespeople (Malakh-Pines et al., 1981) and has recently received significant attention in the sales literature (Hollet-Haudebert et al., 2011; Lewin & Sager, 2007; Lewin & Sager, 2008; Rutherford et al., 2011; Shepherd et al., 2011). The effects of burnout include health problems for individuals, performance problems for the organization, and lower value for customers (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Thomas & Lankau, 2009). Due to its negative impact on outcomes which are important to organizations, it is important to further our understanding of how salespeople deal with stress that can ultimately leads to burnout.

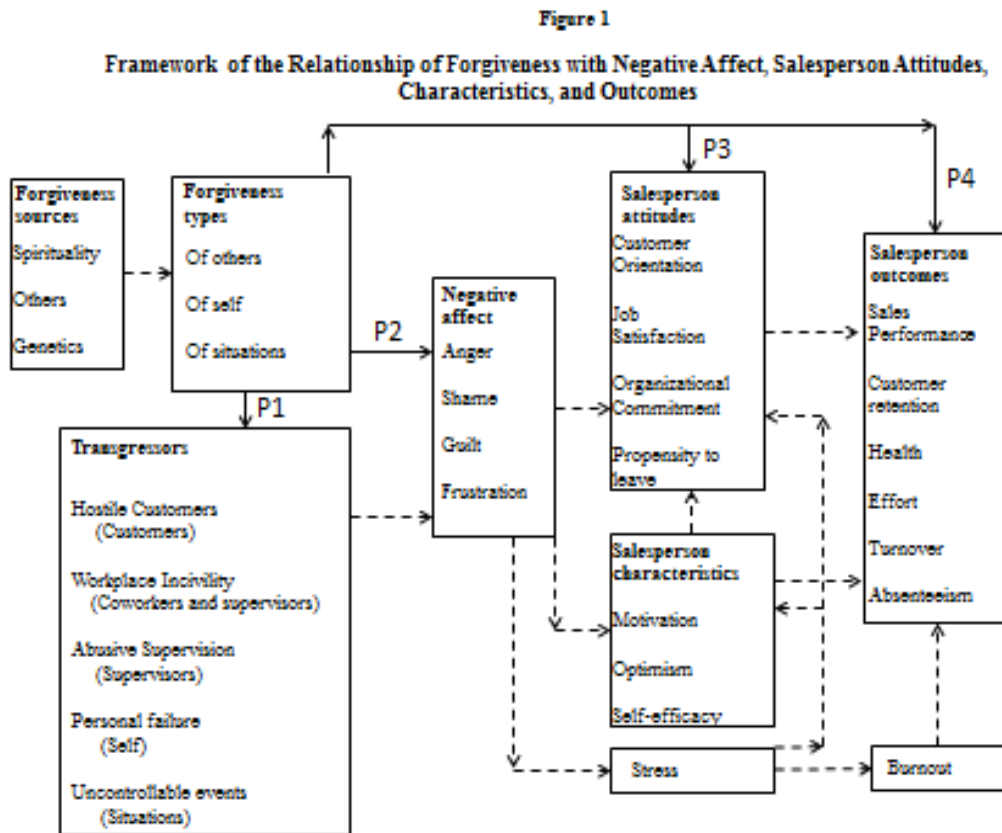
Forgiveness is an important concept for further study in the sales literature due to its potential to minimize the negative health and attitudinal effects of stress as well as to enhance the quality of interpersonal relationships both inside and outside of the organization. Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which predicts that loss of resources is the principal ingredient in the stress process, is based on the premise that individuals adopt a strategy of minimizing the loss of resources when faced with stress and building reserves of resources to offset future losses. These resources include personal characteristics, however scant research has investigated which personal characteristics may be useful as reserves for salespeople to combat the effects of stress to accomplish important personal and organizational goals. In this paper, forgiveness is conceptualized as a resource that salespeople use to minimize the stress they experience. The positive outcomes of forgiveness are proposed to mitigate the harmful effects

of stress and contribute to enhanced salesperson productivity and organizational success overall.

Concepts gleaned from the sales, psychology, organizational, and marketing literatures were used to create the framework and proposed relationships of interest in this paper. The purpose of this paper is to address extant gaps in the sales literature and provide an integrative conceptual framework to investigate how salespersons utilize forgiveness to minimize stress and improve coping mechanisms. Reducing the negative effects of stress creates value for the individual, their employer, and customers due to their better psychological and physical health, improved relationships, consistent efforts, and positive attitudes which, in turn, facilitate performance. The focus of this paper is to develop propositions concerning how forgiveness directly and indirectly influences these processes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This framework's unique core depicts the relationships between forgiveness, sources of transgressions, negative affect, salesperson attitudes, stress, burnout, and salesperson outcomes. A brief description of each of the relevant variables in the framework follows, and propositions to guide future research are developed and presented.



Forgiveness

Forgiveness is viewed in the positive psychology literature as one of the character strengths according to the values in action (VIA) classification (Peterson, 2006). These strengths reflect universal virtues from moral philosophy and religious traditions and are regarded as personality traits with the potential to influence a variety of processes and outcomes of interest to sales practitioners and researchers. The definition of forgiveness as “transgression-related motivational change toward one’s transgressor, with revenge- and avoidance-related motivations subsiding and being replaced with restored motivations toward benevolence” (Tsang et al., 2005, p. 789) is derived from the work of McCullough et al. (1997). Thus, forgiveness is a personal characteristic, and can lead to behaviors consistent with forgiveness. Practicing forgiveness is seen as a response that can restore harmony in interpersonal relationships and benefit relationships after damaging conflicts or misdeeds have occurred (Exline et al., 2004; McCullough, 2000). While forgiveness may be viewed as an organizational value (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012) in this paper, forgiveness is viewed as a personality trait which is a resource for salespersons to use to cope with stress.

Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory is based on the premise that people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what threatens individuals is the threat of resource loss. COR theory predicts that when individuals are faced with stress they attempt to minimize the loss of resources. When not facing stress, the model predicts that people take a long-term view and try to develop a surplus of resources to offset possible future losses (Hobfoll, 1989). Resources are defined as "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). Personal characteristics are seen as resources if they assist an individual in resisting stress, and many personality traits are regarded as having the capacity to serve this purpose. Forgiveness clearly meets the relevant criteria as a resource in COR theory. Although no propositions are developed regarding the sources of forgiveness, conceptual justification for their inclusion is provided below.

Spiritual and religious beliefs, goals, and practices are the core of a personality (Emmons, 1999) and spirituality has been defined as "having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort" (Park et al., 2004, p. 33). Spirituality can be regarded as a source of forgiveness through formal channels such as religions since virtually all major religions encourage forgiveness (Davis et al., 2015; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Henry, 2006, p. 125). To the extent an individual identifies themselves as spiritual, having forgiveness could have symbolic value as it helps define who they are (Hobfoll, 1989). Emmons (2006) describes forgiveness as a spiritual process with emotion regulating properties. Organizational culture is defined in the marketing literature as "the pattern of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organizational functioning and thus provide them norms for behavior in the organization" (Deshpande & Webster, 1989, p. 4). Organizations can foster forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012) if it is an important aspect of their organizational culture since organizational values represent "enduring beliefs that a specific mode of conduct or end state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). "Others" is used in this framework in a broad sense. Individuals who provide forgiveness can stimulate forgiveness in the recipient (Thompson et al., 2005). Others may also include parental influence since forgiveness is considered a personality trait and 40-50% of traits have a genetic basis (Jang et al., 1998).

Forgiveness and transgressors

A salesperson encounters myriad situations in the course of their work that can be considered sources of transgressions. These can spur feelings of anger, frustration, rejection, and failure. Transgressions could result from interactions with customers, coworkers, competitors, suppliers, and supervisors which can cause a salesperson to be the recipient of incivility, rudeness, anger, and dishonesty. Personal shortcomings can lead to self-perceptions of guilt, shame, and failure in a salesperson's mind. Finally, uncontrollable situations create obstacles to success in the life of a salesperson. Therefore, others, self, and situations can be regarded as transgressors.

Transgressors are the entities towards which forgiveness is directed. Forgiveness can only be warranted when transgressions occur, and it seems to be the best approach to dealing with transgressions. Transgressions are events perceived as violating individuals' expectations and assumptions about how they, other people, or the world "ought" to be (Thompson et al., 2005). Customer anger (Koppitsch et al., 2013), customer aggressiveness (Grandey et al., 2004), customer incivility (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010), and destructive acts from customers in channel relationships (Hibbard et al., 2001) are examples of transgressions produced by customers that affect salespersons. Abusive supervisors (Restubog et al., 2011; Tepper et al., 2011) and incivility in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Chen et al., 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008; Lim et al., 2008) are examples of transgressions that may be experienced from coworkers and supervisors by salespersons. The source of a transgression, and therefore the object of forgiveness, may be oneself, another person or persons, or a situation that one views as being beyond anyone's control, e.g., an illness, "fate," or a natural disaster (Thompson et al., 2005). Personal shortcomings, such as aberrant behavior or failure to achieve desired goals, can certainly be regarded as capable of making the self a target for forgiveness.

Thompson et al. (2005) explicitly identify three types of forgiveness: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. The inclusion of situations is particularly relevant in this framework since COR theory identifies environmental circumstances as a frequent threat or cause of the depletion of people's resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Examples of these environmental circumstances might include economic pressures, competitors' actions, natural disasters, or relationship difficulties. Because different facets of forgiveness are explicitly included in this definition it is helpful in providing an explanation for situations where an individual high in forgiveness of others, for example, may be not as forgiving of their self or of situations.

A salesperson is motivated to maintain favorable customer relationships, collegial relationships with supervisors and coworkers, and a healthy view of their self to perform their work effectively. Their ability to deal with unexpected,

adverse situations contributes to their resilience, defined as “the ability to persist in the face of challenges and to bounce back from adversity” (Reivich et al., 2011, p. 25). Because forgiveness has positive effects on relationships (Exline et al., 2004) future transgressions should be lessened. Therefore, the following proposition is offered:

Proposition 1: Forgiveness is negatively related to transgressions whereby as a salesperson’s forgiveness increases (decreases) future transgressions against the salesperson decrease (increase).

Forgiveness and negative affect

Negative affect is defined as a “general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement that subsumes a variety of aversive mood states, including anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear, and nervousness (Watson et al., 1988, p. 1063). Anger is caused by events that are unpleasant or undesirable (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). It is described as “displeasure joined with a focus on the blameworthiness of someone else’s actions” (Ortony et al., 1988, p. 147). Shame represents a negative focus on the entire self, whereas guilt is a negative focus on one’s specific behaviors (Kim et al., 2011). Frustration takes place when goal accomplishment is stymied or stopped. Multiple studies have found that forgiveness has a negative relationship with negative affect (Ahktar et al., 2017; Sanchez-Gonzalez et al., 2015; Toussaint et al., 2019; Worthington et al., 2007). Because the stronger trait of forgiveness changes motivations from revenge or avoidance to benevolence (McCullough et al., 1997), the practice of forgiveness should lead to better relationships (Exline et al., 2004) and reduce the number of transgressions that elicit negative affect. Therefore, it is proposed:

Proposition 2: Forgiveness as a personality trait is negatively related to negative affect whereby as a salesperson’s forgiveness increases (decreases) their negative affect decreases (increases).

Forgiveness and salesperson attitudes

Smith (2012) finds empirical support for a positive relationship between forgiveness and customer orientation. Customer orientation in a salesperson embodies the practice of the marketing concept, as salespersons who have high levels of customer orientation act in ways to increase long-term customer satisfaction (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). Forgiveness in a salesperson decreases the urge to seek revenge against or practice avoidance with customers, coworkers, or supervisors that have committed transgressions against them. The motivation to practice benevolence instead revenge should directly contribute to a customer orientation that focuses on satisfying customer needs (McCullough et al., 1997) and stronger interpersonal relationships with coworkers and supervisors (Exline et al., 2004). Several studies find a positive relationship for customer orientation on performance as well (Brown et al., 2002; Cross et al., 2006; Sigauw et al., 1994), however meta-analytic findings note that the relationship may change “as new evidence accumulates” (Franke & Park, 2006, p. 699).

Two of the most widely studied job attitudes are job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Job satisfaction is defined as “the feelings a worker has about their job” (Smith et al., 1969, p. 100). While job satisfaction is traditionally viewed as a global evaluation, research supports five distinct facets of job satisfaction, namely satisfaction with the work itself, satisfaction with pay, satisfaction with promotion opportunities, satisfaction with coworkers, and satisfaction with supervisors (Smith et al., 1969). Each facet can differ in its antecedents and associations with conceptually linked variables (Kinicki et al., 2002; Smith et al., 1969) as well as in their predictive relationships with outcome variables (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001). Previous research finds a positive relationship between forgiveness and job satisfaction (Booth et al., 2018; Stackhouse, 2019) via one or more of its five facets.

Organizational commitment is defined as “the degree to which individuals (1) willingly identify with their employer, (2) attempt to meet the goals of their employers, and (3) embrace their employer’s values” (Mowday et al., 1979, p. 226). A propensity to leave is the likelihood that an employee will voluntarily end their relationship with their employer in the near future (Bluedorn, 1982). Organizational commitment is important because highly committed employees perform better (Hunt et al., 1985; Mowday et al., 1979) and are less likely to develop intentions to leave the organization (Johnston et al., 1990). To the extent an organization embraces forgiveness as an organizational value, benevolence may increase identification with and commitment to the organization (Mowday et al., 1979).

The combined positive effect of job satisfaction and organizational commitment should reduce a salesperson’s propensity to leave. A salesperson with a high propensity to leave negatively impacts an organization and, conversely, a low propensity to leave would be regarded as benefit to the organization. It is proposed that:

Proposition 3: Forgiveness is positively related to salesperson attitudes. As forgiveness increases (decreases) in a salesperson, salesperson attitudes increase (decrease).

Forgiveness and salesperson characteristics

Salesperson characteristics is an inclusive term that refers to the individual’s motivation, optimism, and self-

efficacy. It can also encompass personality traits, values, and goals, but is constrained to characteristics directly related to stressors. Some of these characteristics positively correlate with each other but retain a distinct identity and can be described separately. Motivation concerns “energy, direction, persistence and equifinality” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69). Optimism is synonymous with hope and means “expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about” (Park et al., 2004, p. 606). Self-efficacy has been defined as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action to meet given situational demands” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 408). Motivation (Weitz et al., 1986), optimism (Park et al., 2004) and self-efficacy (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998) are shown to positively correlate with job performance.

Although no direct relationship is depicted in the framework between forgiveness and salesperson characteristics, one may exist in addition to the depicted indirect relationship that is fully mediated by negative affect.

Stress

Stress is defined as a "psychological condition in which the individual perceives or experiences challenges to physical or emotional well-being as overwhelming their ability and resources for coping" (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007, p. 147). Gunnar and Quevedo (2007) point out that frequent activation of stress reactions, with genetic, organ, emotional, and behavioral components, increases the risk of mental and physical disorders. While an important consideration, the effect of forgiveness on stress, and ultimately burnout, is conceptualized as being fully mediated by negative affect. This prediction is consistent with COR theory, which views personal characteristics as resources if they can assist an individual in resisting stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Forgiveness serves as a resource that can counteract the stressors associated with negative affect. Therefore, negative affect is viewed as a variable that fully mediates the relationship between forgiveness and stress.

Burnout

The extant sales literature associates burnout with higher rates of absenteeism and turnover (Thomas & Lankau, 2009). Client-centered workers are most susceptible to burnout, making this condition an especially critical concern for salespersons (Shepherd et al., 2011). The phenomenon takes a toll not only on the salesperson’s health, as evidenced by the vast stream of research on salesperson stress, but also on performance. While forgiveness is depicted in the model as having a distal relationship with burnout, it plays an important role in preventing a range of possible deleterious outcomes. Specifically, forgiveness appears to remove the fuel generated by negative affect that contributes to debilitating stress and eventual burnout.

Forgiveness and salesperson outcomes

The proposed direct and indirect outcomes of forgiveness ultimately affect performance at the individual and organizational levels. Each outcome warrants unique attention in the sales literature since sales performance is considered an important goal for organizations (Churchill et al., 1985) for ensuring organizational success (MacKenzie et al., 1998). Customer retention is a natural result of customer loyalty that can be fostered by the salesperson’s market orientation. Health in a salesperson promotes better coping skills, resilience from job stress (Porter et al., 2008) and improved productivity. Effort is “an input to work” (Christen et al., 2006, p. 139) and reflects the degree of motivation a salesperson would have to work towards accomplishing a goal. Turnover and absenteeism represent concerns because of the costs associated with recruiting and training new employees as well as the lost revenue from vacant sales positions.

The relationship of forgiveness to salesperson outcomes is the most complex relationship in the framework. The presence of forgiveness should lead to greater happiness in salespersons due to improved relationships with coworkers, supervisors, and customers. Forgiving salespersons should also experience less negative affect. Thus, the effect of forgiveness on salesperson outcomes should be mediated by these variables. However, forgiveness is prosocial in nature, and studies link prosocial behavior to sales performance and reduced levels of turnover (George & Bettenhausen, 1990). The strong interpersonal relationships and the absence of a sense of entitlement (Exline et al. 2004) present in salespersons high in forgiveness should allow them to naturally interact with customers to discover and satisfy the customers’ needs, leading to better performance. The dispositional tendency to avoid anger when transgressions occur is important to salespersons with high levels of forgiveness. Excessive anger is associated with emotional and physiological illnesses, including cardiovascular disease (Kim et al., 2011). Based on these findings, the following proposition is developed:

Proposition 4: Forgiveness is positively related to salesperson outcomes whereby as forgiveness increases (decreases) deleterious salesperson outcomes increase (decrease).

Mediated relationships in the model

Relationships depicted with a dotted line are not formal propositions since these relationships are well established in their respective literatures. However, there are several relationships with intervening variables between forgiveness and selected outcome variables which could be tested with formal hypotheses. Transgressors could mediate the relationship between forgiveness and negative affect. Negative affect could mediate the relationship between forgiveness and salesperson attitudes, between forgiveness and salesperson characteristics, and between forgiveness and stress. The effect of forgiveness on negative affect specified in Proposition 2 may be the most critical aspect of this framework given the ubiquity of negative affect as a mediating variable. Salesperson attitudes could fully or partially mediate the relationship between forgiveness and salesperson outcomes depending on whether a direct relationship is supported between these constructs.

Implications for sales management

Forgiveness is not simply a desirable personal trait; it is conceptualized here as an important contributor to business success. By selecting employees who possess a high degree of trait forgiveness and encouraging the practice of forgiveness by incorporating the value into organizational culture, firms can benefit through improved productivity from salespersons, improved relationships with customers, greater cooperation within the firm, greater commitment to the firm's goals, and a healthier, more stable workforce. These outcomes are widely recognized as beneficial for smooth organizational functioning. By viewing forgiveness as a resource, firms would benefit from fostering this disposition in their sales training and by restoring the resources of salespersons who expend forgiveness in their regular activities. Such investments provide the firm with improved productivity, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and other positive outcomes, while the salesperson is healthier due to improved methods for coping with stress.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented a conceptual framework investigating the effect of salesperson forgiveness on salesperson attitudes, characteristics, and outcomes. A major focus was how forgiveness affects relationships with customers, coworkers, supervisors, and self to minimize negative affect. Research in psychology, sales, and human resources was used to develop formal propositions pertaining to critical salesperson attitudes such as customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and propensity to leave as well as desirable salesperson characteristics and important salesperson outcomes. Implications for sales management and firm advocacy were discussed.

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