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Competitive Cohesion: Success in the Sales Force

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A competitive personality is often seen as a key factor in the success of salespeople. Salespeople who are competitive are driven to win and achieve their goals, which is associated with high sales performance. However, competition can also be a threat to cohesion because salespeople may become more focused on their own individual success than on the success of the team. Sales managers face the challenge of creating a work

environment that fosters both competitiveness and cohesion. When salespeople feel supported and connected to their team, they are more likely to share best practices, collaborate on deals, and help each other succeed. This cohesion can lead to significant improvements in the performance and retention of the sales force.

For our research, we tested the effects of trait competitiveness on work-group cohesion, along with subsequent effects on individual sales performance and turnover. In this study, we challenge the traditional view that competitiveness and cohesion are mutually exclusive.

Trait Competitiveness and Group Cohesion

Trait competitiveness is defined by a strong desire to achieve and succeed—often in comparison to others—and has been shown to have a direct positive effect on salesperson performance. Salespeople who are high in trait competitiveness are more motivated to achieve sales goals, engage in behaviors that lead to high sales performance, such as prospecting, networking, and following up with leads.

On the other hand, work-group cohesion refers to how members of a work group bond together and commit to working toward common goals. Sales teams that are more cohesive are more likely to be supportive and collaborative, and salespeople in these teams are also more likely to share ideas and help each other succeed.

Our Study and Findings

Our study was conducted with 358 salespeople working at 86 offices of a large company. The salespeople completed a survey that measured their trait competitiveness and work-group

cohesion. We combined the survey data with archival performance data from company records. We also matched the survey data with objective data capturing salesperson turnover. We aimed to discover the relationship between trait competitiveness and work-group cohesion in a sales force, expecting a negative relationship between competitiveness and cohesion. Our results contradicted this expectation, providing surprising and important implications for sales managers.

In analyzing the survey results, we found 1) a *positive* relationship between trait competitiveness and work-group cohesion, 2) a positive relationship between trait competitiveness and salesperson performance, and 3) a negative relationship between work-group cohesion and salesperson turnover (i.e., improving retention). In other words, trait competitiveness (through increased work-group cohesion) contributed to reducing turnover, while also contributing directly to increased salesperson performance. Given these counterintuitive findings, we suspected there was more to this story to be uncovered.

Salesperson Performance and Competitive Focus

To further explore the relationship between trait competitiveness and work-group cohesion, we conducted a follow-up qualitative study on competitive focus (interpersonal, intergroup, or intrapersonal) to understand if this aspect of competition moderates the relationship between trait competitiveness and work-group cohesion. In other words, the type of competition on which salespeople focus can influence how trait competitiveness affects relationships with colleagues.

Salespeople who had a focus on interpersonal competition were more likely to have lower work-group cohesion. On the other hand, salespeople who had a focus on intergroup competition or intrapersonal competition were more likely to have higher work-group cohesion. That is, salespeople who focused on competing against themselves (intrapersonal; e.g., competing against one's past production) or improving overall group performance (intergroup; e.g., competition between offices for the number of cold calls made) also had strong group identity and cohesion. Salespeople who have a focus on *interpersonal* competition are more likely to view their colleagues as rivals and compete with them for resources, recognition, commissions, etc. This type of competition can lead to conflict, resentment, and a lack of trust within the sales team. As a result, salespeople who have a focus on interpersonal competition are less likely to form strong bonds with their colleagues or experience high work-group cohesion.

Salespeople who have a focus on *intergroup* competition or *intrapersonal* competition are more likely to view their colleagues as teammates and partners in success. These types of competition can promote teamwork, collaboration, and support within the sales team. As a result, salespeople who have a focus on intergroup competition or intrapersonal competition are more likely to form strong bonds with their colleagues and experience high work-group cohesion. These salespeople were also found to have lower turnover intentions than salespeople focused on interpersonal competition.

Real Estate Implications

Our findings show that competitive focus plays an important role in the relationship between trait competitiveness and work-group cohesion. Sales managers should be aware of the different types of competitive focus (interpersonal, intergroup, or intrapersonal) and how this focus can impact work-group cohesion. With this understanding, sales managers can develop strategies to promote a more cohesive work environment either through intergroup or intrapersonal competitive focus. Real estate team leaders and managers should set clear and ambitious goals for the team, provide opportunities for collaboration and teamwork, reward and recognize personal and team success, create a culture of support and encouragement, and organize social events and team-building activities. A key discovery is that rewards that are not scarce contribute to a culture of abundance where everyone is encouraged to improve and succeed. This type of culture is a strong contributor to cohesion and performance. By following these tips, firms can create sales teams that are both competitive and cohesive, leading to improved sales performance, reduced turnover, and a more positive and productive workplace.



Recommended Reading

Pappas, Alec, Wyatt Schrock, Manoshi Samaraweera, and Willy Bolander (2023), “A Competitive Path to Cohesion: Multilevel Effects of Competitiveness in the Sales Force,” *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 43(3), 222-240. DOI: 10.1080/08853134.2023.2170237

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Dr. Alec Pappas’ (PhD – Florida State University) research focuses on social dynamics (e.g., intraorganizational social networks) in sales and sales management, and how these factors affect performance and turnover. He has published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Retailing*, and *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*. Prior to academia, he worked as an account manager for MotionPoint Corporation, responsible for managing the relationships with various Fortune 1000 companies expanding to new international markets.

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Dr. Wyatt Schrock's (PhD – Michigan State University) research interests include salesperson motivation, sales manager leadership, and brand management. His research has been published in the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *Marketing Letters*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of International Marketing*, the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, and other outlets. He has presented his research at academic conferences in the U.S. and abroad. He currently serves on the Editorial Review Boards at the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* and the *Journal of Business Research*. Dr. Schrock's research has twice received the annual James M. Comer Award for "Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory." He has also co-authored an academic textbook, *Professional Selling*. Dr. Schrock has ten years of corporate experience in a variety of sales, marketing, and analyst roles and has worked for companies such as Procter & Gamble and Gannett. At MSU, Dr. Schrock teaches Sales Management.

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Dr. Manoshi Samaraweera's (PhD – University of Houston) research centers around enhancing the performance of salespeople, the primary revenue generators for companies. Dr. Samaraweera teaches a range of courses, including Professional Selling, Marketing Research, Social Media Marketing, and Principles of Marketing. She has published in the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, and *Journal of Business Strategy*, among others. Her research has earned her accolades, including the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management's* Marvin Jolson Award for Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Practice. Dr. Samaraweera's dedication to improving sales force effectiveness and her commitment to enhancing the performance of sales professionals make her a distinguished academic in the field of marketing.

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Dr. Willy Bolander (PhD – University of Houston) studies influence, persuasion, and leadership in business relationships. He has published in the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, the *Journal of Business Ethics*, and the *Journal of Retailing* among others. Willy also hosts The Sales Lab Podcast (www.thesaleslab.org), featuring discussions where the world's top sales leaders share their secrets.



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