

CHAMPIONING IN SALES MANAGEMENT: CONSTRUCT DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study advances the understanding of a recently identified leader behavior known as championing, which is argued to be especially effective in a sales context. Championing occurs when sales managers protect their salespeople from nonessential tasks, enabling them to focus on activities that enhance sales performance. Building on the exploratory work by Peesker et al. (2019), the current study delves deeper into the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of championing. The first major section is a literature review that relates championing to established leadership theories, including path-goal, transformational, ethical, and servant leadership. This review demonstrates how championing aligns with and reinforces these theoretical frameworks, providing a deeper understanding of the behavior. Following this theoretical groundwork, the authors developed a new multi-item measurement scale for championing by integrating traditional scale development methods with innovative techniques involving artificial intelligence. Specifically, items for the scale were generated using a chain-of-thought prompting process with ChatGPT-3.5. These items were empirically tested through conventional scale development procedures, which included analyzing data from a sample of 254 salespeople using both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. This approach resulted in the creation of a robust four-item scale with a one-factor solution that demonstrated strong construct validity. Future researchers can use this measure to examine how championing interacts with other established leader behaviors to generate positive work outcomes, such as reduced role stress, increased trust in managers, and higher sales performance. Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of championing by highlighting its relevance within the broader leadership literature, making a strong case for its effectiveness in a sales context, and offering a validated measurement tool for future research.

Keywords

Championing Leader Behavior, Leadership Theory, Sales Management, Scale Development, Confirmatory Factor Analysis

1. Introduction

In a recent leadership study conducted by Peesker et al. (2019), four leader behaviors were identified as particularly effective within a sales environment: coaching, collaborating, customer engagement, and championing. These behaviors emerged from an analysis of interviews with 36 sales professionals, who were prompted to elaborate on leader behaviors that could be exhibited by sales managers to boost the performance of their subordinate salespeople. Given the exploratory nature of this qualitative study, the authors recommended that subsequent research delve deeper into these behaviors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their impact. Building on this recommendation, our study rigorously focuses on the role of championing, which is the most novel and under-researched of the four leader behaviors.

In a sales context, championing occurs when sales managers intervene on behalf of their subordinate salespeople in a way that protects them from tangential and/or nonessential work tasks, allowing them to focus more effectively on activities directly related to enhancing sales performance (Peesker et al., 2019). We view championing as a leader behavior that is particularly important and relevant for today's sales teams. The reasons for this are elaborated upon in the next section, where we conduct a literature review to assess championing in relation to established leadership theories that are most commonly used in a sales context, including transformational leadership, servant leadership, path-goal theory, and ethical leadership. Although none of these existing leadership theories explicitly conceptualizes a behavior called championing, they do incorporate similar concepts.

Consequently, this literature review provides us with the information needed to validate the construct definition of championing and offers insight into how this leadership behavior can enhance sales performance. This is the first of the two main objectives of our research.

Following this theoretical groundwork, we address the second objective: developing a multi-item measurement scale for championing. We will use a newly established process that involves leveraging the artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT to assist us in the first stages of scale development (Hoffmann et al., 2024). Specifically, ChatGPT will help us generate an initial pool of items based on our literature review and theoretical insights, refine these items through iterative feedback, and ensure that the language used is clear and concise. We will then empirically test the scale to confirm its reliability using a sample of salespeople. This approach ensures that our scale accurately captures the essence of championing and can be effectively used by future sales leadership researchers to gain deeper insights into this important leader behavior.

2. Literature Review

Scores of academic studies have applied leadership theory to a sales context (Ahearne et al., 2005). These studies typically borrow concepts from the organizational behavior literature and apply them to how sales managers can effectively lead their subordinate salespeople. A common argument is that leading salespeople is different from leading other employees due to several unique factors. Salespeople often work remotely, managing sales territories that might be hundreds of miles away from their manager. Additionally, salespeople are frequently compensated through commission-based structures, which can complicate leadership dynamics. Without proper oversight, performance-based incentives might lead salespeople to engage in unethical behaviors that financially benefit them but damage customer relations in the long run. Such actions can undermine the values and goals of the organization, ultimately harming its reputation and sustainability.

These past sales leadership studies have generally examined leader behaviors that were first shown to be effective in non-sales settings. Indeed, many of these leader behaviors were also found to be associated with a number of positive sales-related outcomes when applied to a sales context. The most notable positive outcome is sales performance, but there are several others. For example, fostering the acceptance of group goals, which is leader behavior that encourages collaboration, is a core transformational leader behavior not only linked to higher in-role performance, but also to more organizational citizenship behaviors (MacKenzie et al. 2001). By engaging in coaching behavior through one-on-one verbal feedback and role modeling, sales managers create an environment of mutual trust and respect between themselves and their salespeople (Rich, 1998). Sales managers who accompany salespeople on client meetings can provide a model of how to sell by engaging with the customers of their subordinates. This is shown to lead to greater customer value and a more caring ethical climate (Jaramillo, et al., 2013; Schwepker & Schultz, 2015).

The Peesker et al. (2019) study stands out from other sales leadership studies because it began by conducting in-depth interviews with sales professionals to identify leader behaviors. This approach makes sense if leading salespeople is indeed different from leading other employees. Because they live and work as part of a sales team, these professionals can provide insights that are more relevant and specific than those derived from general employee leadership studies. Three of the four leader behaviors that emerged from this exploratory study—coaching, collaboration, and customer engagement—have been previously studied in both sales and non-sales contexts. We briefly reference examples of this in the previous paragraph. However, the fourth behavior, championing, has never been directly identified or examined by any leadership theory or academic article. Therefore, our research aims to explore and understand the unique aspects of championing in a sales context.

2.1 Defining Championing

As stated in the introduction, championing in a sales context is defined as intervening on behalf of salespeople in a way that protects them from tangential and/or nonessential work tasks so that they can better focus on activities that are directly related to enhancing sales performance (Peesker et al. 2019). Protection is a key aspect of this leadership behavior. A sales manager might "protect" salespeople by championing them through several specific actions. For instance, the manager could handle administrative tasks or delegate them to support staff, thereby freeing up salespeople's time to focus on selling. Additionally, the manager might intervene in internal meetings, ensuring that salespeople are not required to attend unless their presence is crucial. This allows the sales team to devote more time to customer interactions and closing deals. The sales manager could also advocate for their team by negotiating with other departments to minimize interruptions and streamline processes that directly affect the sales workflow. By removing obstacles and securing the resources needed for their team, the manager enables salespeople to concentrate on activities that directly enhance sales performance, such as prospecting, nurturing leads, and closing sales. This protective role ensures that the sales team's efforts are maximized and aligned with the primary goal of driving sales.

Championing becomes especially important in the context of remote work, where salespeople might live hundreds of miles away from company headquarters and the internal staff they need to collaborate with. Remote

salespeople often face unique challenges, such as reduced access to in-person support and increased reliance on digital communication. A sales manager who champions their team can help bridge this gap by advocating for remote salespeople's needs and ensuring they receive timely assistance from headquarters. This can include facilitating remote access to resources, ensuring prompt responses from support departments, and troubleshooting issues that arise due to physical distance. By actively protecting remote salespeople from the inefficiencies and potential disconnects of remote work, managers enable their team to maintain high productivity levels and focus on their primary objective of driving sales.

2.2 Championing in Established Leadership Theory

While championing is not explicitly identified or discussed in any established leadership theory, elements of this leader behavior are implicitly integrated into the discussion of other concepts within those theories. We will examine how elements of championing are reflected in four leadership theories that are widely utilized in the academic literature on sales leadership: path-goal theory, servant leadership, transformational leadership, and ethical leadership. This review aims to clarify the nuances of championing and demonstrate why it can be an effective approach for sales managers to improve their salespeople's performance.

2.2.1 Path-Goal Theory

The path-goal model was one of the first leadership theories applied to a sales context (see DeCarlo et al., 1999). With its focus on both supportive and instrumental leader behavior, this theory provides a useful framework for understanding why championing is effective for sales managers (House, 1971; Hackman and Oldham, 1974). Supportive leadership focuses on fostering a nurturing atmosphere that enhances employee motivation and well-being. This is consistent with the aspect of championing that involves shielding salespeople from nonessential tasks and distractions – so they can focus on core selling activities. In other words, championing is a supportive leader behavior that fosters a more focused and positive work environment. The other dimension of the path-goal model is instrumental leadership, which involves the leader clearly defining and communicating expectations to followers. While less about direct guidance, championing does at least complement instrumental leadership by ensuring that salespeople are not hindered by obstacles and can concentrate on achieving their sales goals. This dual alignment with both supportive and instrumental leadership dimensions helps explain why championing can effectively motivate salespeople and improve their performance, as it facilitates their path to success by removing barriers and providing crucial support.

2.2.2 Servant Leadership Theory

In servant leadership theory, several core concepts help explain why championing is an effective leader behavior in a sales context. Servant leadership emphasizes the leader's role in serving and supporting their team members, prioritizing their needs and development over personal gain (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008). Similarly, championing involves sales managers actively advocating for and protecting their salespeople, ensuring they can focus on core sales activities without undue distractions or obstacles. This aligns with servant leadership principles of empowerment and support, where leaders enable their team's success by facilitating their growth and removing barriers to performance. By championing their sales team, managers demonstrate a commitment to fostering a supportive work environment that encourages trust, collaboration, and professional development. This approach not only enhances sales performance by allowing salespeople to focus on customer interactions and closing deals but also contributes to a positive organizational culture characterized by mutual respect and shared goals, as advocated in servant leadership theory. Thus, championing embodies the servant leadership ideal of serving others first, promoting team effectiveness, and achieving sustainable success in sales contexts.

2.2.3 Transformational Leadership Theory

Championing in a sales context aligns closely with transformational leadership theory, particularly through the concept of individualized support. Transformational leaders are known for their ability to inspire and empower their followers by providing individualized attention and support tailored to their needs and development (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978). Similarly, championing involves sales managers actively advocating for and protecting their salespeople, ensuring they have the resources and support necessary to succeed. This includes removing obstacles, advocating for team needs within the organization, and providing personalized guidance and mentorship. By practicing championing, managers demonstrate a commitment to the individual growth and success of their sales team members, which is a hallmark of transformational leadership's individualized consideration. This approach not only enhances sales performance by enabling salespeople to focus on core activities like customer engagement and deal closure but also fosters a culture of trust, collaboration, and professional development within the sales team. Ultimately, championing in sales environments exemplifies how transformational leadership behaviors, specifically individualized support, can effectively drive organizational success by empowering and motivating team members to achieve their full potential.

2.2.4 Ethical Leadership Theory

Finally, ethical leadership theory helps us understand why championing is effective for sales managers by highlighting the importance of fairness, integrity, and concern for employee well-being. Ethical leaders are perceived as principled individuals who care about their employees and demonstrate ethical behavior both personally and professionally (Brown et al., 2005; Schwepker, 2015). In the context of championing, sales managers who act ethically will protect their salespeople from nonessential tasks and obstacles, thereby demonstrating fairness and respect for their time and efforts. This protective approach aligns with ethical leaders' role in influencing followers' behavior through moral management. By removing distractions and focusing on enhancing their salespeople's performance, these managers model ethical behavior and create a supportive environment that fosters trust and motivation. Furthermore, ethical leaders use clear communication and accountability to reinforce values, which complements championing by ensuring that salespeople understand and align with organizational goals while being motivated by a leader who genuinely supports their success.

3. Scale Development

Having defined the construct of championing and completed our literature review, the next step is to develop a measurement scale for this new concept. This valid scale will allow researchers to rigorously test and confirm the efficacy of championing and assess how it interacts with various leader behaviors to enhance performance and other work outcomes. We view this first-ever measure as both a significant advancement in sales leadership research and a practical tool for improving sales management practices.

As mentioned in the introduction, the initial stages of our scale development process utilized the artificial intelligence platform ChatGPT, following the chain-of-thought prompting guidelines proposed by Hoffman et al. (2024). Chain-of-thought prompting has been shown to enhance the reasoning capabilities of large language models by directing them to generate a sequence of intermediate steps leading to a final answer for multi-step problems (Chen et al., 2023; Diao et al., 2023; Terry, 2023). In other words, rather than asking ChatGPT to develop the scale for championing in a single step, we used a series of prompts to guide the AI platform through the scale development process incrementally. We employed ChatGPT-3.5 version for all prompts.

Our first step was to ask ChatGPT to generate a set of initial items. Next, we prompted it to identify subthemes. We then prompted ChatGPT to generate a set of secondary items based on these subthemes. Finally, we used traditional methods to refine the AI-generated scale through empirical testing that included both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. A more detailed description of these steps is provided in the subsequent sections.

3.1 Generating Initial Items

The first step was to ensure that ChatGPT understood the concept of championing, as this leader behavior has not been previously documented in any academic literature. We did this by submitting our literature review and construct definition of championing along with the following prompt: *"Given this discussion of the leader behavior called championing, create 10-20 items that could be used in a Likert scale to measure the concept of championing (with the response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Write these survey items so they could be given to salespeople who are evaluating the extent to which their sales manager engages in championing."* This prompt resulted in ChatGPT generating the following 15 initial items:

1. My sales manager shields me from nonessential administrative tasks so I can focus on selling.
2. My sales manager intervenes to protect me from unnecessary meetings that do not relate to my sales performance.
3. My sales manager handles tasks that are not directly related to sales, allowing me to concentrate on client interactions.
4. My sales manager actively works to remove obstacles that hinder my ability to meet sales targets.
5. My sales manager advocates on my behalf to ensure I have the resources I need to perform my job effectively.
6. My sales manager ensures that I am not burdened with tasks outside my core responsibilities.
7. My sales manager prioritizes my time by delegating non-sales related tasks to support staff.
8. My sales manager helps to streamline processes to reduce interruptions in my workflow.
9. My sales manager protects me from having to engage in tasks that do not contribute to achieving sales goals.
10. My sales manager actively negotiates with other departments to minimize disruptions to my sales activities.
11. My sales manager provides support by removing unnecessary barriers that affect my sales performance.
12. My sales manager ensures I have a clear focus on activities that directly impact my sales outcomes.

13. My sales manager takes steps to minimize distractions from my primary sales responsibilities.
14. My sales manager advocates for my needs within the organization to facilitate my sales efforts.
15. My sales manager removes bureaucratic hurdles that could impede my ability to achieve sales results.

3.2 Identifying Subthemes

Next, we prompted ChatGPT to categorize the 15 initial items listed above into subthemes or dimensions of championing, and then group them accordingly. This is the second step in our series of chain-of-thought prompts, which we are using because it has been shown to improve the reasoning ability of language models like ChatGPT. The following six subthemes were identified (with the initial items associated with each group in parentheses):

- Shielding from nonessential tasks (initial items 1, 6, 9)
- Handling administrative and non-sales tasks (initial items 3, 7)
- Intervening in meetings and reducing interruptions (initial items 2, 8, 13)
- Advocacy and securing resources (initial items 5, 14)
- Removing obstacles and barriers (initial items 4, 11)
- Facilitating focus and minimizing disruptions (initial items 10, 12)

3.3 Generating Secondary Items

In the third and final step of our chain-of-thought prompts, we directed ChatGPT to combine the 2-3 items under each group into a single item that best captures the subtheme domain. This approach was undertaken to streamline and enhance the clarity of the measurement instrument. This resulted in the following six secondary items:

1. My sales manager protects me from nonessential tasks to allow me to focus on my selling activities.
2. My sales manager manages or delegates non-sales tasks, allowing me to concentrate on client interactions.
3. My sales manager minimizes my involvement in unnecessary meetings and interruptions to maintain my focus on sales.
4. My sales manager advocates for my needs and secures the necessary resources to enhance my sales performance.
5. My sales manager removes obstacles and bureaucratic barriers, ensuring I can meet my sales targets effectively.
6. My sales manager negotiates with other departments to minimize disruptions and ensure my primary focus remains on sales activities.

3.4 Empirical Testing

No longer relying on artificial intelligence, we next moved on to empirically test this six-item scale using more traditional scale development processes (Churchill, 1979; Netemeyer et al., 2003). A survey was administered to a sample of 254 U.S. salespeople recruited through the panel provider Prolific. Each participant rated their level of agreement with the championing scale items on a scale of 1-7 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) and answered a series of demographic questions. In this sample of 254 respondents, 60.3% were men, and the mean age of all respondents was 33.9 years. The length of time spent in a sales job, with the current company, and with the current manager averaged 6.4 years, 4.9 years, and 3.4 years, respectively. Respondents worked in a wide variety of industries, including technology (9%), healthcare (4%), finance (18%), retail (36%), manufacturing (8%), services (17%), and other (8%). With respect to the type of compensation package, 53% of the sample was paid a base salary plus commission, 41% were paid a straight salary, and the remaining 6% were paid straight commission. In terms of their primary work environment, 35% of respondents were office-based, 20% were field-based, 9% worked remotely, and the remaining 37% worked in some hybrid combination of office, field, and/or remote.

The first step of empirical testing was to analyze the sample's responses to the championing scale items via an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using maximum likelihood and direct oblimin rotation (Hair et al., 2019). This resulted in secondary items 2 and 3 being removed due to inadequate loadings. Once these two secondary items were removed, the EFA supported a one-factor solution with a strong model fit. In other words, all four items strongly loaded on the same factor, indicating that they are cohesive and reflect the same theoretical concept that is the championing leader behavior.

Several specific metrics generated from the EFA confirmed that the items strongly relate to the factor. For example, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) metric of 0.822 points to good data quality. Further, communalities all exceeded 0.65, and item loadings on the factor were all above 0.7, explaining 66.27% of the variance. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 and the item-total correlations that ranged from 0.57 to 0.71 also support the scale's reliability and validity. In summary, the indicators associated with this empirical test all exceeded acceptable levels (Hair et al., 2019).

For the final phase, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to verify the factor structure identified in the exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Performing a CFA after an EFA helps to confirm the factor structure identified in the exploratory phase, supporting its internal validity and contributing to a more robust and theoretically sound measurement scale (Hair et al., 2019). The CFA model fit with the remaining four items was acceptable ($\chi^2/df = 5.39$, $p > .05$; GFI = 0.991; SRMR = 0.028; RMSEA = 0.082). These results indicate that the model fits the data well and supports the validity of the four-item championing scale. The proposed scale for championing is shown in Table 1, along with each item's mean and standard deviation.

Measurement Items	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)	
My sales manager protects me from nonessential tasks to allow me to focus on my selling activities.	4.73 (1.67)
My sales manager advocates for my needs and secures the necessary resources to enhance my sales performance.	5.21 (1.51)
My sales manager removes obstacles and bureaucratic barriers, ensuring I can meet my sales targets effectively.	4.82 (1.56)
My sales manager negotiates with other departments to minimize disruptions and ensure my primary focus remains on sales activities.	4.98 (1.55)

Table 1: Measurement Scale for Championing

4. Discussion and Future Research Directions

This study extends the work of Peesker et al. (2019) in two key ways. First, by integrating championing with established leadership theories—such as path-goal, transformational, ethical, and servant leadership—we demonstrate how this behavior aligns with and reinforces these theoretical frameworks. Second, through the development and empirical testing of a new measurement scale, we provide further clarification of this leader behavior's domain and create a tool that future researchers can use to explore its impact across different organizational settings and examine its relationship with other leadership behaviors and outcomes. Overall, this study enhances our understanding of championing by highlighting its relevance within the broader leadership literature, by explaining its potential effectiveness in a sales context, and by offering a validated measurement tool.

Comparing the new measure of championing to other established leader behaviors, such as articulating a vision and providing verbal feedback, represents a crucial next step in validating and refining the construct. This comparative analysis will not only shed light on how championing interacts with and complements other leadership behaviors but will also serve as a key method for confirming the discriminant validity of the championing construct (Hair et al., 2019). By distinguishing championing from other behaviors, we can ensure that it is uniquely defined and measured. Although including these other leader behaviors in the current study's model was beyond its scope, such future comparisons will be essential for providing a comprehensive understanding of the role of championing within the broader leadership framework and validating its distinctiveness as a separate and meaningful construct.

Another important step is to examine potential outcome variables associated with championing, such as role stress, trust in the manager, and sales performance. Investigating these outcomes will provide deeper insights into the practical implications of championing and its impact on various aspects of the sales environment. For instance, understanding how championing might impact role stress can reveal whether this leader behavior helps reduce the pressures salespeople face, thereby enhancing their job satisfaction and performance. Consider two often-studied dimensions of role stress: role ambiguity and role conflict. Championing should logically reduce role conflict by shielding salespeople from non-essential tasks and ensuring they can focus on their primary sales responsibilities, thus minimizing conflicting demands. Similarly, by clarifying priorities and removing obstacles, championing can help reduce role ambiguity. This makes it easier for salespeople to understand their key responsibilities and how to achieve their goals effectively. Future research should empirically validate these expected relationships to fully grasp the impact of championing on sales performance and employee well-being.

Similarly, exploring the relationship between championing and trust in the manager can reveal whether salespeople who experience supportive championing behaviors develop stronger trust and rapport with their managers. Salespeople are more likely to trust managers who protect them, which is crucial because trust is a fundamental element of effective leadership. As leadership writer Warren Bennis asserts, "Trust is the lubrication that makes it possible for organizations to work" (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, p. 43). When managers engage in championing, they demonstrate a commitment to supporting their salespeople, which can foster a sense of reliability and confidence. This increased trust not only strengthens the manager-employee relationship but also enhances overall team cohesion and effectiveness, leading to improved performance.

Another noteworthy contribution of this study is the application of an innovative technique that integrates artificial intelligence into the scale development process. While this method has been utilized in other academic

fields, it is novel within marketing and sales research (Hoffman et al., 2024). Specifically, we employed chain-of-thought prompting with ChatGPT to generate initial scale items, a novel approach that leverages advanced AI capabilities to enhance item creation. This methodological advancement is significant because it merges traditional scale development practices with cutting-edge technology, potentially increasing both the efficiency and creativity in item generation. By incorporating AI, we draw on a broader range of perspectives and insights, which may lead to more comprehensive and nuanced measures. This approach not only demonstrates the potential of AI in research methodology but also sets a precedent for future studies to explore and refine the use of technology in developing robust and reliable measurement tools.

Despite the significant contributions of this study, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional nature of the data limits our ability to make causal inferences, and common method variance may be a concern due to the reliance on self-reported data from a single source. Additionally, while the focus on salespeople is a strength in contextualizing the findings within a sales environment, using panel data from Prolific introduces potential issues related to sample representativeness and data quality. Future research should consider longitudinal designs and diverse data sources to address these limitations and further validate the championing construct and its outcomes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a robust framework for understanding the leader behavior of championing within a sales context. By integrating championing with established leadership theories and developing a validated measurement scale, we have laid the groundwork for future research to explore this construct in greater depth. The practical implications suggest that sales managers who engage in championing can significantly enhance their team's performance and well-being. Future studies should build on these findings to establish a comprehensive understanding of championing and its impact across various organizational contexts.

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