

Observed Issue Selling: The Effects of Role Models, Willingness to Issue Sell, and Inclusion in Decision Making

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Abstract

This study examines issue selling (an early component of the change process in which higher-level managers are influenced to pay attention to issues). Building on the conservation of resources model, social contextual factors (role models for issue selling and inclusion in decision making) are proposed to explain when and how issue selling occurs during the early stages of change. This research breaks new ground by examining issue selling behavior (as observed by supervisors) in conjunction with willingness to issue sell. Results based on a sample of 191 employee–supervisor dyads suggest that role models positively contributed to willingness to issue sell, which was positively related to issue selling when individuals perceived that they were involved in decision making. To increase the likelihood that employees will engage in issue selling to facilitate change, managers should provide exposure to issue selling role models and should increase employees' perceived inclusion in decision making.

Keywords

issue selling, role modeling, inclusion in decision making, social contextual factors

Issue selling, which involves attempts to influence higher-level managers to pay attention to issues or ideas, is an important component of the organizational change process (Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, &

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Lawrence, 2001; Webber, Bishop, & O'Neill, 2012). Issue selling occurs at an early stage in the change process and is a key determinant of which change initiatives achieve momentum (Dutton et al., 2001). In addition, issue selling has been viewed as a bottom-up process on which higher-level managers depend for information necessary for ensuring continuous change (Luo, Wang, Lu, & Liang, 2015). Employees are closer than top management to customers and suppliers, and therefore hold the potential to identify issues that offer opportunities for change in the organization.

Although issue selling has been viewed as an important path by which change processes may be initiated in organizations (e.g., Dutton et al., 2001), we have a limited understanding of when and how issue selling behavior occurs. This is because empirical research on issue selling has incorporated self-reported willingness to issue sell (which focuses on behavioral intentions) or self-reported issue selling (e.g., Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Bishop, Webber, & O'Neill, 2011). Taking this intention and self-report approach to measuring issue selling is problematic because it may not reflect how actual issue selling occurs. If actual behavior is what allows organizational leaders to be influenced and create strategic change, then actual issue selling behavior rather than the willingness to issue sell or self-reported issue selling is particularly crucial for both scholarly and practitioner knowledge about issue selling to advance. Research on willingness to issue sell has yielded important findings, but it has not addressed under what conditions individuals who are willing to issue sell actually will engage in the specific behavior of issue selling.

In this study, we build on conservation of resources theory to develop a model of social contextual factors that influence the issue selling process in organizations (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Since issue selling involves both risk and a desire to accomplish change, conservation of resources theory is particularly appropriate since it addresses both these components with its emphasis on how individuals are motivated to both protect existing resources and accumulate resources for the future (Ashford et al., 1998; Hobfoll, 2001). Our model focuses on social contextual factors since, as Vough, Bindl, and Parker (2017) note, there is a dearth of research on social contextual factors involved in bringing about change that extend beyond leadership approaches. We propose and test a model involving social contextual factors that includes not only an individual's willingness to issue sell (the key issue selling variable in empirical research on the topic) but also observed issue selling behavior.

This research endeavors to provide several contributions. First, this study offers to the change literature empirical evidence about factors that encourage issue selling. Issue selling allows for more bottom-up involvement in change initiatives and wider consideration of issues as possible directions for change initiatives. Second, this research incorporates supervisor ratings of issue selling behavior rather than relying on willingness to issue sell as a proxy for issue selling behavior. This allows for increased knowledge about the occurrence of issue selling from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Also, this work provides evidence about social contextual factors influencing aspects of the issue selling process. While transformational leadership and participative leadership have been found to be a part of the social context in which individuals choose to engage in proactive behaviors (which include issue selling), less is known about other social contextual factors (e.g., Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012).

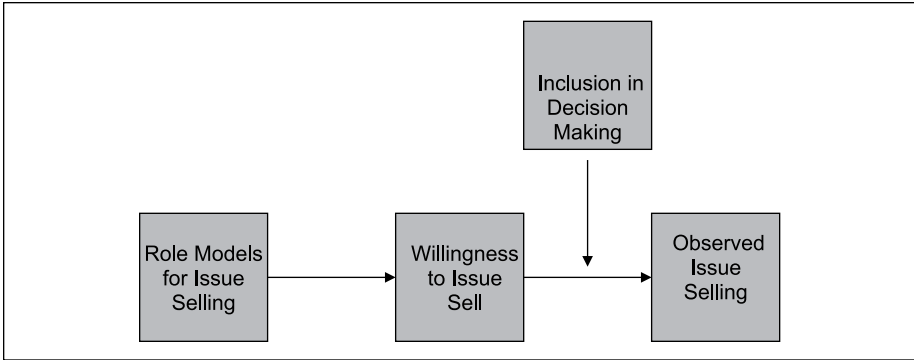


Figure 1. Moderated mediation model of the relationship between role models and observed issue selling.

Role Models and Willingness to Issue Sell

The first relationship depicted in our model shown in Figure 1 is the linkage between role models for issue selling and willingness to issue sell. Building on the conservation of resources model, role models for issue selling offer a social contextual resource that provides a key source of social learning (Bandura, 1977; Hobfoll, 1989). Individuals learn what is important for fulfilling their goals from role modeling, as they learn vicariously from watching role models behave and succeed (Bandura, 1977). Role models for issue selling serve as a resource, providing information about how issue selling will be received as well as how to sell effectively. The information that individuals perceive from role models helps reduce the risk they otherwise may perceive in assessing how willing they are to issue sell (Ashford et al., 1998).

Social learning theory and social information processing theory suggest that role models play a key role in shaping willingness to engage in behavior (Bandura, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). According to social learning theory, individuals derive beliefs about what behaviors are appropriate (and thus they come to a decision about which behaviors they are willing to engage in) by observing others in their environment with particular attention to behavior that is positively rewarded (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Social information processing theory posits that people form attitudes based on social information (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Role models provide social information that is used to develop attitudes about whether role models' behavior is something in which the individual will partake in the future. In addition, role models enable individuals to overcome or minimize risks and costs associated with issue selling by viewing issue selling in advance of actual engagement in such behavior.

Research on how individuals adapt to new roles as they take on additional professional responsibilities is suggestive of a similar conclusion about the relationship between role models for issue selling and a willingness to engage in issue selling. In a qualitative study, Ibarra (1999) found that individuals in the midst of a career transition built a store of knowledge and attitudes about particular roles through observation

of role models in their environment. Working with the information gleaned from observation and social comparison, individuals evaluate whether they will take on the role themselves as a possible identity or part of their self-concept (Gibson, 2004; Ibarra, 1999). Possible new roles that have received confirmation by social experience (e.g., seeing other role actors meet with success) are likely to be incorporated by the individual as his or her own (Swann, 1983).

Role models for issue selling provide critical information about how to issue sell that other contextual factors in the issue selling literature have not emphasized. For instance, Ashford et al. (1998) attributed their lack of results for norms favoring issue selling to that variable's inability to convey information about *how* to issue sell in predicting willingness to issue sell through image risk. Another weakness of norms favoring issue selling is that such norms do not provide individuals with the confidence they might need to be willing to issue sell, whereas role models for issue selling can increase a person's confidence that they too can engage in such behavior. In addition, role models build theoretically on a key driver of proactive behaviors since they provide important information about how to fulfill one's responsibilities (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). Role models for issue selling also build on the plea made by Dutton and Ashford (1993) that role characteristics need to be considered as an antecedent of issue selling behavior. Thus, we aim to examine the social contextual variable of role models in efforts to identify the impact role models can have on willingness to issue sell. This suggests,

Hypothesis 1: Perceived role models for issue selling will be positively related to willingness to issue sell.

Moderated-Mediation Effect

We propose a moderated-mediation effect in which individuals who have observed role models for successful issue selling will engage in issue selling via a willingness to issue sell when they perceive they will be involved in decision making in the organization (i.e., high degree of inclusion in decision making) as shown in Figure 2. Next, the mediating effects of willingness to issue sell will be discussed followed by arguments pertaining to the moderating effect of inclusion in decision making.

Mediating Effects of Willingness to Issue Sell

Implicit in much of the published empirical work on issue selling is an underlying assumption that willingness to issue sell *mediates* the relationship between variables indicating context favorability and observed issue selling (e.g., Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 2002). For instance, while Ashford et al. (1998) tested a theoretical framework of factors contributing to willingness to sell gender-equity issues, they began their abstract with a question that implied that they expected issue selling behavior to be the last link in their model, "Under what conditions will women raise and promote gender-equity issues in their work organizations?" Dutton et al. (2002)

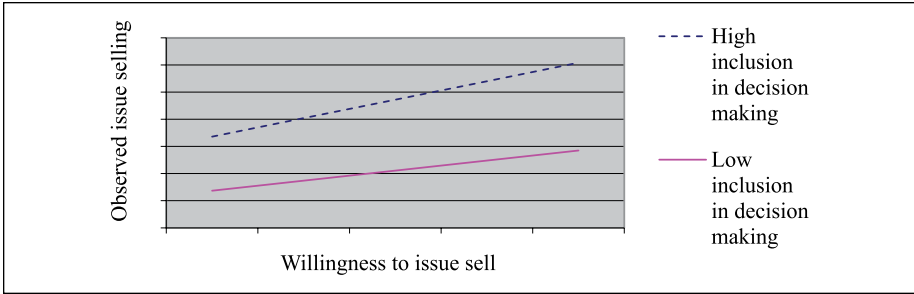


Figure 2. Interaction between willingness to issue sell and inclusion in decision making on observed issue selling.

investigated the strength of different cues for affecting willingness to sell a gender-equity issue, but they too emphasized issue selling behavior (which they define as discretionary behavior) as an assumed outcome: “A primary assumption of our paper is that individuals’ discretionary action is often based on contextual sensemaking” (p. 355) involving diagnosing whether taking action was warranted based on contextual cues. These two works, which comprise some of the few empirical investigations of willingness to issue sell, both imply that willingness to issue sell is a mediator of the relationship between context favorability and observed issue selling. However, with the exception of Bishop et al. (2011), who measured issue selling moves via self-report, observed issue selling is implied, but not measured.

Thus, we test the extend the work above by theorizing and testing willingness to issue sell as a mediator between the relationship of perceived role models and actual issue selling behavior (as observed by supervisors). Social learning theory is also suggestive of the viability of a model in which willingness to issue sell serves as a mediator (Bandura, 1977; Wood & Bandura, 1989). According to social learning theory, individuals observe role models that they emulate as a result of beliefs about the behaviors in which they are willing to engage. Before engaging in the behavior that has been modeled by others, individuals form cognitive representations in their minds about whether the behavior should be repeated.

Moderating Effect of Inclusion in Decision Making

As shown in Figure 1, we posit that individuals who have witnessed role models and developed a willingness to issue sell will engage in issue selling behavior as observed by others under certain circumstances, such as when they feel that they are involved in decision making. Feeling involved in decision making allows willing individuals to engage in issue selling in an attempt to accumulate resources for the future via change, building on the conservation of resources model (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001).

Although the theory of planned behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) has forwarded the argument that an individual’s willingness to engage in behavior is predictive of

engaging in that behavior, more recent work has suggested that moderator variables are needed to more precisely capture the relationship between intentions and behavior (Ajzen, 2002). When the behavior in question involves an assessment of risk versus benefits (as is the case with issue selling), intentions may be particularly likely to be inflated since they are hypothetical and do not involve the dangers involved in engaging in the actual behavior (Ajzen, 2002). The importance of variables that increase an individual's propensity to act on intentions is underscored by Allen, Weeks, and Moffitt (2005), who found a stronger positive relationship between intentions to quit and turnover behavior for less risk-adverse individuals. Individuals who in the abstract express willingness to issue sell ultimately may decide to hold back from engaging in issue selling behavior if they perceive danger or a lack of sufficient benefits in doing so.

If individuals who are willing to issue sell have reason to believe that there will not be negative consequences as a result of actually engaging in issue selling behavior, then they should be likely to do so. One way that employees may be reassured that they have some degree of protection against negative consequences is if they perceive that they have a high degree of inclusion in decision making. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) found leader inclusiveness (defined as inviting and acknowledging others' views) created psychological safety in cross-disciplinary health care teams.

Inclusion in decision making also offers an opportunity to leverage existing resources and accumulate additional ones. Employees with a high sense of inclusion in decision making perceive "opportunities to be involved in important decision-making processes in the organization" (Wayne, Shore, Brommer, & Tetrick, 2002, p. 592). Wayne et al. (2002) found inclusion in decision making to be positively related to perceived organizational support, which also has been found to create conditions in which employees engage in behaviors that reflect a strong commitment to the organization (Riggle, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009). Since issue selling reflects a commitment to the welfare of the organization (by convincing higher-ups of important issues to which the organization should pay attention), one would expect inclusion in decision making to propel an individual willing to issue sell to engage in that behavior.

In addition, research on perceived insider status also can be drawn on to highlight the mechanism involved when an individual feels included in decision making in the organization (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Perceived insider status refers to perceptions of being an insider and thus feeling valuable to the organization. In an empirical study, perceived insider status was found to increase an individual's propensity to engage in organizational citizenship behavior (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). In a similar manner, inclusion in decision making may propel an individual who is willing to issue sell to act on those intentions as a result of feeling involved in decision making within the organization.

Also, inclusion in decision making involves both information and relationship benefits that may increase the likelihood that employees are successful when they attempt to issue sell. An individual who is willing to issue sell and, as a result of having a high degree of inclusion in decision making, also has relevant information (e.g., an understanding of the individuals and social relationships involved) at their disposal is likely to be able to be effective when they engage in issue selling. Inclusion in decision

making also involves benefits that are relationship based; individuals who have a high degree of inclusion in decision making have been granted insider status in the eyes of higher-ups (Pelled, Ledford, & Mohrman, 1999). Thus, when an individual who is willing to issue sell also has a high degree of inclusion in decision making, supervisors are likely to notice their issue selling attempts as a result of their privileged treatment. In contrast, individuals with low inclusion in decision making may engage in issue selling, but their efforts may not be recognized as such as a result of having fewer opportunities to be involved in organizational decision making. Individuals must perceive inclusion in decision making, which signals that the context is free of danger to actually issue sell, suggesting,

Hypothesis 2: The strength of the mediated relationship between role models for issue selling and observed issue selling (through willingness to issue sell) will depend on a high level of inclusion in decision making, such that when inclusion in decision making is high, the relationship will be stronger than when inclusion in decision making is low.

Method

Sample and Procedures

This study examines issue selling in Taiwan. Since Taiwan has rapidly become part of the modern global economy where change via such processes as issue selling is prevalent, Taiwan provides a relevant setting for this research (Lin, Kao, Chen, & Lu, 2016). Furthermore, since roles and expectations of others are an important part of Taiwanese culture (e.g., Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-McIntyre, 2003), studying role models as they relate to issue selling is particularly relevant in the Taiwanese context. The survey instrument was developed in English, but was translated to Chinese to facilitate respondents' understanding of the items and instructions. We followed Brislin's (1986) recommendation of translation and back-translation (by individuals who were blind to the study's hypotheses) to ensure conceptual equivalence between the original English-language instrument and the Chinese version.

The survey instrument was administered in a large financial services firm in Taiwan to 220 employee-supervisor pairs (440 individuals). The director of human resources invited a random sample of employee-supervisor pairs across business units across the company to participate in the study. While the pairs were identified and known to the researchers, the surveys were administered separately with the employees completing the employee attitude surveys in one session, and in a different session supervisors completing a different survey that reflected the focal employee's behaviors.

Employees and their supervisors completed their surveys at different times at separate survey administration meetings so that employees would not feel pressured to complete the survey. Paper questionnaires were distributed to survey participants in a meeting room of the company in the presence of one of the researchers to ensure respondents of the confidentiality of their responses. Out of 440 invited

individuals, 384 individuals (192 pairs) participated for a response rate of 87%. The final sample consisted of 191 employee–supervisor pairs (or 382 individuals) since one pair had to be discarded due to missing data. Each supervisor rated only one employee.

Each supervisor received an envelope with his or her name and ID code on the outside label. On the label also was “For the supervisor of [employee]” so that it would be clear who the supervisor should have in mind while completing the survey. Employee surveys also included his or her name and ID code in addition to the supervisor’s name to ensure clarity about which supervisor the employee should have in mind while completing the survey. The survey inside the envelopes only contained the ID code so that names did not appear on any of the surveys.

The study design of having two different surveys for the employee and the supervisor allowed for the protection from the threat of same source bias in the analyses, thereby providing data from different sources for the independent (predictor) and dependent (criterion) variables as recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2012).

Measures

Role Models for Issue Selling. A three-item measure was constructed for this study to capture the extent to which the focal employee individual was aware of role models in the organization who had successfully sold issues to supervisors. The items that comprise this scale, which were rated by the focal individual on a 7-point Likert-type scale, are as follows: “I can think of at least a couple of examples of employees here who have successfully brought issues to the attention of supervisors,” “There are good role models to follow here for how to raise issues to supervisors,” and “If there was an issue that I wanted to bring to my supervisors’ attention, I could follow the lead of other employees here to know how to do it” ($\alpha = .80$).

Willingness to Issue Sell. Ashford et al.’s (1998) three willingness-to-issue-sell items were included to assess the amount of effort, time, or energy a respondent was willing to devote to convince someone at work of an issue or idea that is important to him or her ($\alpha = .94$). A 7-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *None at all* (1) to *A great deal of (effort/time/energy)* (7) accompanied the items, which were rated by the focal individual.

Inclusion in Decision Making. Wayne et al.’s (2002) four-item scale was used to assess the degree to which respondents felt included in decision making at work. This scale’s items, which were assessed by the focal individuals with a 7-point Likert-type scale, are as follows: “I receive privileged communication from management—I am in the loop,” “Implications of decisions are discussed with me,” “I am asked for my opinions on important issues,” and “I am involved in making important decisions in my company” ($\alpha = .90$).

Observed Issue Selling. Supervisors rated individuals on their demonstration of issue selling behavior using three items measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale. These items were developed based on conceptualizations of issue selling as involving efforts that direct higher-ups' attention to issues and persistence in trying to get support for an issue (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Similar to Van Dyne and LePine's (1998) voice items (which are phrased in general terms about speaking up about matters that affect the work group), these items captured the tendency to sell issues in general. The items comprising this scale are as follows: "He or she convinces individuals at higher levels of the importance of issues," "He or she persists in the face of adversity in trying to get support for an issue," and "He or she does not give up in trying to sell an issue to people at higher levels in the organization when he or she cares about the issue" ($\alpha = .87$).

Control Variables

Job Complexity. Baer and Oldham's (2006) two-item job complexity scale was included as a control variable since job complexity consistently has been shown to influence personal initiative at work (e.g., Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007; Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2007) and thus was likely to influence issue selling behavior, which similarly requires personal initiative. The items were completed by the supervisors using a 7-point Likert-type scale. A sample item is, "Overall, how complex is the job held by this individual?" with the response scale ranging from *not at all complex* to *very complex*. ($\alpha = .86$).

Gender. Gender was included as a control variable since supervisors have been found to expect men and women to differ with respect to proactive behaviors (Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009; Kidder & Parks, 2001). Gender of the focal individual employee was coded such that 0 = *women* and 1 = *men*.

Education. Just as educated individuals are expected to have more innovative ideas (e.g., Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999), supervisors' assessments of observed issue selling could be biased by the expectation that educated employees issue sell more due to their greater expertise. Thus, employees' educational level was included as a control variable. The coding for education was as follows: 1 = *high school*, 2 = *technical college*, 3 = *bachelor's degree*, and 4 = *graduate degree*.

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and Cronbach's alphas for all the variables in this study. All Cronbach's alphas for the measures are well above the .70 standard (Nunnally, 1978) and the correlations among the variables are in the expected directions.

To determine provide support for the two measures developed for this study (role models for issue selling and observed issue selling), a confirmatory factor analysis was

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Job complexity	4.73	1.26	(.86)						
2. Gender	0.37	0.48	.03	—					
3. Education	2.53	0.90	.24**	.26**	—				
4. Role models for issue selling	4.43	1.26	.00	-.03	-.13	(.80)			
5. Willingness to issue sell	5.47	1.13	-.01	.00	.11	.41**	(.94)		
6. Inclusion in decision making	4.00	1.40	.01	.06	-.13	.50**	.27**	(.90)	
7. Observed issue selling	4.28	1.19	.48**	.06	.05	.02	.01	.04	(.87)

Note. *n* = 191.
 p* < .05. *p* < .01.

conducted using LISREL. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that a two-factor model (corresponding to role models for issue selling and observed issue selling) was a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 5.04$; goodness-of-fit index = .99; comparative fit index = 1.00; normed fit index = .99; nonnormed fit index = 1.01; root mean square error of approximation = .00). Furthermore, the items had factor loadings of .97 or greater.

For Hypothesis 1, hierarchical linear regression was conducted in which the control variables were entered in the first step and the independent variables were entered on the second step. For Hypothesis 2, the moderated-mediation SPSS macro described in Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) was used.

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive relationship between role models for issue selling and willingness to issue sell. As shown in Table 2, the relationship between role models for issue selling and willingness to issue sell was positive. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the indirect effect of willingness to issue sell on the role model–observed issue selling behavior relationship would be contingent on a high level of inclusion in decision making. This describes moderated mediation, defined as, “When the strength of an indirect effect depends on the level of some variable, or in other words, when mediation relations are contingent on the level of a moderator” (Preacher et al., 2007, p. 193). Moderated mediation can occur in several ways, which are differentiated by which of the different paths of the mediation effect the moderator variable exerts its influence. Hypothesis 2 posited that inclusion in decision making would affect the path between the mediator variable (willingness to issue sell) and the dependent variable (observed issue selling) such that a high level of inclusion in decision making is needed for willingness to issue sell to mediate the relationship between role models for issue selling and observed issue selling behavior. This model (which is depicted in Figure 1) describes what Edwards and Lambert (2007) call second-stage moderation model (involving moderation of the second “link” of the mediation relationship).

As shown in Table 2, the direct effect of willingness to issue sell on observed issue selling was not significant. However, the regression results depicted in Table 2 do not

Table 2. Regression Results for Predicting Willingness to Sell and Observed Issue Selling.

Variable	Willingness to issue sell	Observed issue selling
Job complexity	-0.06	0.50**
Gender	-0.03	0.07
Education	0.19*	-0.10
Role models for issue selling	0.43*	-0.01
Willingness to issue sell		0.03
F	11.20**	11.68**
R ²	.19	.24
Adjusted R ²	.18	.22

Note. Entries represent standardized regression weights. *n* = 191.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Table 3. Moderated Mediated Results for Role Modeling Across Levels of Inclusion in Decision Making.

Moderator	Level	Conditional indirect effect	SE	z	<i>p</i>
Inclusion in decision making	Low	-0.03	0.03	-0.84	.40
	High	0.09	0.05	2.02	.04

combine moderation and mediation simultaneously. To test the moderated-mediation effect in Hypothesis 2, we used the MODMED command in SPSS, which allows products of regression coefficients to be incorporated into the analysis. The MODMED command also incorporates bootstrapping in which the product of two regression coefficients is repeatedly estimated with bootstrap samples. We examined the magnitude of the conditional indirect effect of role models for issue selling via willingness to issue sell on observed issue selling to be different across high and low levels of inclusion in decision making following Preacher et al.'s (2007) procedures. If moderated mediation is present, there will be a significant difference in the predicted mediation effect at low versus high levels of inclusion in decision making. High and low levels of inclusion in decision making were operationalized as 1 standard deviation above and below the mean score of inclusion in decision making as recommended by Preacher et al. (2007). Job complexity, gender, and education were included in the analysis as control variables. Table 3 presents the estimates, standard errors, *z* statistics, and significance value of the conditional indirect effects for role models across high and low levels of perceived employee inclusion in decision making in the organization. Results suggest that the conditional indirect effect of role models for issue selling on observed issue selling (via willingness to issue sell) was stronger and significant when inclusion in decision making was high (role modeling = .09, *p* < .04), but was weaker and not significant when inclusion in decision making was low (role modeling = -.03, *n.s.*). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

In this field study, we tested a moderated-mediation model grounded in the conservation of resources model that examined when and how observed issue selling (a variable not typically included in published research on issue selling) occurs. Our results indicate that the extent to which role models for issue selling are perceived increases an individual's willingness to issue sell, which in turn leads to observed issue selling when the individual perceives a high level of inclusion in decision making. By studying the interrelationships among role models, willingness to issue sell, observed issue selling, and inclusion in decision making, this research expands our knowledge of issue selling beyond its precursors, helps us understand how social contextual factors influence observed issue selling, and increases our knowledge of issue selling as part of the change process. In addition, this study advances empirical research on issue selling by including supervisor ratings of observed issue selling as the dependent variable (thus moving beyond the focus of previous empirical research on self-reported willingness to issue sell).

This study also offers findings from a context other than the United States, in contrast with previous empirical research on issue selling that has been conducted exclusively in the United States. Research has called for "indigenous" organizational behavior research that is conducted within a single national context outside of the United States (e.g., Werner, 2002). Issue selling is an important upward influence behavior on which countries throughout the world depend and accordingly should be studied in a variety of national or cultural contexts.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to an understanding of *when* willingness to issue sell mediates the relationship between context (role models for issue selling) and observed issue selling. Contrary to previous research that has implied that issue selling behavior will follow willingness to issue sell (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 2002), our findings suggest that willing individuals will engage in issue selling when they perceive being included in decision making in the organization. This result is consistent with the conservation of resources model explanation that individuals wish to conserve and accumulate resources; feeling included in decision making allows one to act on the willingness to issue sell in order to accumulate resources in accomplishing change. Feeling included in decision making also increases an individual's confidence of being heard when undertaking issue selling attempts. This finding points to how feeling a part of a social entity larger than oneself—a social factor previously not considered in issue selling research—can make the difference between being willing to issue sell and actually engaging in issue selling. Our results suggest that willingness to issue sell may not relate to observed issue selling unless other variables (e.g., those that increase our comfort and potential to accumulate resources, such as inclusion in decision making) are considered.

In addition, our results regarding role models for issue selling highlight how a key ingredient of context favorability is providing information about *how* individuals can

issue sell successfully. Ashford et al. (1998) obtained inconsistent findings when they tested the relationship between norms favoring issue selling and willingness to issue sell. Their “norms favoring issue selling” items assessed whether issues tend to be raised in the organization rather than whether there were examples of successful issue selling. Our findings highlight the critical influence of fellow employees serving as successful role models, thus providing an ongoing source of learning and efficacy that influences engaging in issue behavior. Role models provide critical information that can be used to minimize risks and costs associated with issue selling.

By finding empirical support for the relationship between role models and willingness to issue sell, we provide evidence for the role of social learning and identity construction in contributing to an individual’s willingness to issue sell. By doing so, this study has pointed to the value of considering these processes in order to increase our understanding of issue selling. This research also expands treatment of role models in the literature beyond supervisors and beyond the early stages of the organizational socialization process (Gibson, 2004).

To the literature on inclusion, this research offers an expansion of the domain in which this construct is studied beyond leader–member exchange, perceived organizational support (Wayne et al., 2002), and diversity (Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart, & Singh, 2011). The explanation we offered for our findings regarding inclusion in decision making (that inclusion in decision making lowers perceived risk and increases the propensity to engage in behavior to accumulate resources) suggests that inclusion in decision making may be an important variable to consider for scholars considering the relationship between intentions and behavior.

Taken together, our findings regarding both role models and inclusion in decision making highlight key social context factors other than leadership styles that help facilitate the issue selling element of change (Vough et al., 2017). Furthermore, our findings suggest that employees may facilitate change processes via issue selling when they are connected to others. Role models provide individuals with the ability to anticipate and plan by observing others. Inclusion in decision making involves connections with others that offer information as well as support for individuals’ efforts to engage in proactive behavior. Our role model and inclusion in decision making results suggest connections with others as a possible profile of individuals engaging in proactive behavior, which Grant and Ashford (2008) encouraged researchers to study. The notion that individuals engage in proactive behavior when they are connected with others is consistent with Mossholder, Richardson, and Settoon’s (2011) theorizing that helping behaviors occur more frequently in environments in which collaborative interactions are prevalent. Our study extends Mossholder et al.’s arguments with empirical findings on specific features (role models and inclusion in decision making) that could stimulate helping behaviors.

Implications for Practice

There are several ways that the findings of this research can inform managerial practice. Managers interested in increasing their employees’ willingness to issue sell

should deliberately provide exposure to role models who can demonstrate how to issue sell effectively and show that issue selling can be done successfully in the organization. In keeping with the conservation of resources model, managers can view role models as a resource that offer the potential to reduce employees' perceptions of risk while offering a source of confidence for engaging in new behaviors.

In addition, our work suggests that to obtain the value of employee ideas via issue selling, managers should undertake efforts to increase employees' perceived inclusion in decision making. Involving employees in decision making processes thus not only offers advantages with respect to procedural justice and employee engagement but also helps involve employees in change initiatives through issue selling efforts (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2004).

Limitations

As with any research, this study has several limitations. First, our data are cross-sectional, so we cannot conclude with certainty that role models for issue selling increased willingness to issue sell or that an individual's willingness to issue sell was not influenced by engaging in issue selling. In addition, our measures of willingness to issue sell and observed issue selling did not involve respondents having a specific issue in mind (e.g., gender-equity issues). Although the broader nature of how these items were worded allowed respondents to consider a range of issues and thus was not subject to idiosyncratic factors associated with a specific issue, considering a specific issue might have been easier for some individuals to comprehend. Finally, our sample for this research consisted of one large, albeit typical, financial services firm. Because of the fact that it is just one large firm from one industry, the generalizability of our findings is not known. Future research will want to explore replication of our finding across other types and sizes of organizations.

Future Research

While a willingness to issue sell indicates that an individual may intend to engage in issue selling, further research is needed to understand more fully the conditions under which willingness to issue sell will lead to observed issue selling. Other moderators of the relationship between willingness to issue sell and observed issue selling, besides inclusion in decision making, should be studied.

Future research is needed to build on the results obtained in this study. For instance, other variables that, like role modeling, capture learning or efficacy could be investigated to probe further into social contextual factors that influence issue selling. Also, perceived risk could be included to better understand the mechanism by which inclusion in decision making exerts its influence on the relationship between willingness to issue sell and observed issue selling. As suggested by scholars in the area of role modeling (Gibson, 2004), role models are distinct from behavior models or mentors because individuals are able to choose the strength with which they identify with a role model. This points to an interesting direction for future research: measuring the strength of

identification with role models or factors that strengthen identification with role models to better understand how identification with others influences issue selling.

Given the need for employees today to bring issues and ideas to the attention of higher-level managers to increase the effectiveness of organizational change efforts, research must keep pace with this need by providing knowledge that can inform theory and practice about this important behavior. Issue selling research should continue to maximize the expression of ideas that bring meaning to individuals and competitive advantage to organizations.


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