



# Business-to-business salespeople and political skill: Relationship building, deviance, and performance

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has explored the role of political skill as an intra-organizational skill but not in the context of business-to-business seller's customer relationships and sales performance. In this paper, we: (i) develop a framework to explore the relationships between political skill, customer-oriented selling, customer-relationship-building competence, and customer-directed deviance; and (ii) investigate whether these relationships improve sales performance. The empirical analysis includes 240 business-to-business salespeople. Structural equation modeling is used to test the study's hypotheses. Results suggest political skill directly affects salesperson customer-oriented selling, relationship building competence, and sales performance. Customer-relationship-building competence is positively related to customer-oriented selling, which is inversely related to the frequency of customer-directed deviance. Contrary to expectations, customer-directed deviance is not negatively related to both political skill and sales performance. Managerial implications and directions for future research are provided.

## 1. Introduction

Salespeople are responsible for understanding buyer needs and securing purchase commitments. In a setting where buyers experience ongoing attempts to influence their decisions (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021), sellers frequently strategically generate performance through customer-focused behaviors. Political skill is an approach that focuses on influencing others through the use of social competencies (Ferris, Perrewé, Brouer, Douglas, & Lux, 2007) and appears to offer valuable potential in the sales context. Chiefly explored in an intra-organizational context (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005) political skill has recently seen application in sales environments (e.g., Kimura, Bande, & Fernández-Ferrín, 2019; Kalra, Agnihotri, Chaker, Singh, & Das, 2017; Li, Sun, & Cheng, 2017). However, the ability of salespeople to use political influence over buyers has not been examined in combination with relationship building, and ethical/unethical actions to determine its valence in maintaining or increasing sales performance results.

Some politicians leverage the relationships their political skill

provides them to behave unethically (Schweizer, 2020). Can the same be said of salespeople? For more than a decade, the Janssen division of Johnson and Johnson had representatives convince physicians to accept free services as kickbacks to increase their prescriptions of Remicade (Sagonowsky, 2020). Are business-to-business salespeople likely to misuse political skill to produce self-serving (Ferris, Harrell-Cook, & Dulebohn, 2000) and damaging behaviors (e.g., putting one's interests above the needs of the firm, circumventing supervisors, and patronizing behavior) such as those at Janssen? Or are they more likely to use political skill ethically to forge lasting customer relationships? While social interactions impact (Zhang, Lu, & Zheng, 2020) sales outcomes (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021) and are linked to performance (Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, & Ferris, 2015), sales research in this area remains enticing but limited.

The current study has the opportunity to make several significant contributions. First, we broaden our understanding of political skill by examining and understanding certain consequences of it, in particular relationship building and sales performance, among business-to-business salespeople. In doing so, we determine if political skill is

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being used in an unethical manner (i.e., customer-directed deviant behaviors) to achieve sales performance. Second, this research extends political skill beyond intra-organizational skills (Gansen-Ammann, Meurs, Wihler, & Blickle, 2019; etc.) and performance (Lvina et al., 2018; etc.). Limited research has examined political skill in the context of salespeople in inter-organizational relationships. For example, Kalra et al. (2017) examined creative performance, organizational identity, and customer satisfaction. However, the current study is unique in that it specifically focuses on the interaction of political skill with ethics, inter-organizational relationships, and sales performance. Third, we expand our knowledge of factors impacting unethical salesperson behavior by examining a framework by which political skill may impact a specific type of unethical sales behavior (i.e., customer-directed deviance). Finally, we add to our understanding of both customer-oriented selling and relationship building in sales by connecting them to an important and managerially influenceable antecedent, political skill. As such, management is informed of an additional mechanism for influencing these behaviors among salespeople to improve sales performance.

This paper commences with a theoretical foundation and justification for proposed hypotheses, followed by the methodology and research results. The findings are discussed, the managerial direction is provided, and limitations and directions for future research are offered.

## 2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

The overall foundation of this research rests with sales performance, which continues to be an important research focus (e.g., Lussier et al., 2021). That is, salespeople are expected to produce positive organizational outcomes, although different processes can be used to induce performance. The mechanism by which political skill may improve sales performance rests on two unique but connected theories - social influence and relationship marketing.

First, the foundation of political skill can be seen in social influence theory (see Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003) where individuals in relationships seek to influence others while they are being influenced (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Capable of persuading others to action (Liu, Chen, & Fan, 2021), the focus of social influence theory is on how others are affected (i.e., through molding behaviors and attitudes) and associated mechanisms, antecedents, and consequences (Treadway et al., 2013). Applied to various settings (e.g., Gao, Melero-Polo, & Sese, 2020) including marketing (e.g., Risselada, de Vries, & Verstappen, 2018), social influence offers valuable insight into how salespeople can persuade buyers. Social influence, therefore, appears particularly relevant to the business-to-business markets where the buyer's journey is a social process, and participants, functions, and relationships are evolving throughout the experience (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021). In this setting, sellers attempt to influence buyers during various stages of the relationship, while their final goal remains some aspect of performance. Previous research however does not explain the influence, implementation, and delivery style, which heightens the efficacy of social influence efforts (Ferris et al., 2007).

The application of political skill in sales through social influence appears to advocate two unique outcomes - reduced unethical behavior (which we proxy with customer-directed deviance) and relationship development. The purpose is to apply social influence to encourage business-to-business buyers to make certain decisions that enhance performance and can be shaped (e.g., Grewal & Sridhar, 2021). Importantly, intraorganizational relationships are essential to sellers (Kalra et al., 2017) and the buyer's journey is a social process. In this setting, we propose political skill is a mechanism of social influence that results in constructive client relationships (Li, Sun, & Cheng, 2017) and subsequently improved performance.

Social influence is also tied to relationship marketing which continues to be a critical foundation for success (Rosa & Rua, 2020) in that it is tied to selling performance (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Seeking a positive relationship with a buyer should discourage unethical

behaviors. We, therefore, contend individuals with polished political skill can communicate intended behaviors (Fiske & Taylor, 1984) or alter messages for their benefit. Filling the need to explore positive outcomes of political skill (Frieder & Basik, 2017), we expect politically skilled individuals to be capable of building relationships and enhancing performance.

Political skill demonstrates predictive ability across many disciplines and contexts (see Table 1 for a representative sampling of studies that examine political skill with performance). Applied to many settings, individuals studied in these examples are varied and include general employees, managers, students, engineers, immediate supervisors and subordinates, and entrepreneurs. While employee settings differ, the potential value appears to exist for examining impacts of political skill on business-to-business salespeople, as this is lacking in the literature.

The model illustrated in Fig. 1 proposes how political skill leads to higher customer-oriented selling, customer-relationship-building competence, and sales performance. These same constructs are expected to be associated with less frequent customer-directed deviance. Political skill (from Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005) is the foundational construct in this study and will be presented in more detail because it provides a strong tool that may be disseminated through managerial oversight of the sales organization and is a performance differentiator (e.g., García-Chas et al., 2019).

### 2.1. Political skill

Work environments are often political (Buchanan, 2008), requiring individuals to navigate bureaucracies (Bolander et al., 2015). Traversing organizations often requires individuals to be able to influence others (persuade, negotiate, etc.) by using what has been conceptualized as 'political skill' (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005). Political skill is a set of interpersonal characteristics focused on relational management (Perrewé, Ferris, Funk, & Anthony, 2000). Essential for organizational survival (Ferris et al., 2007) and upward mobility (Pfeffer, 2010), individuals possessing elevated political skill believe they understand others and can regulate their interactions (Perrewé, Zellars, Ferris, Rossi, Kacmar, & Ralston, 2004). In a setting where common goals are critical (Madhavaram & Hunt, 2017), political skill manifests through social intelligence, the adeptness to communicate sincerity, trust, and confidence while providing an internal management system for stress (Gansen-Ammann et al., 2019) and affording individuals a sense they control their future (McAllister, Ellen, & Ferris, 2018).

Various attributes have been associated with political skill to navigate work environments. For instance, organizational support (García-Chas et al., 2019), group performance (Lvina, Johns, & Vandenberghe, 2018), reduction of negative work behaviors (De Clercq et al., 2019), and ethics (Kacmar, Andrews, Harris, & Tepper, 2013) are affected by individuals with higher political skill. Further, links between identifying opportunities and social networking (Shu, Ren, & Zheng, 2018) infer political skill may be a proactive selling tool.

Political skill is composed of four dimensions: apparent sincerity, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and social astuteness (Ferris et al., 2007). These dimensions represent social competencies that are distinct, yet related (Frieder & Basik, 2017). This skill depicts an individual's proficiency to employ information to persuade others in the quest of organizational or personal goals (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005).

As developed in the seminal piece on political skill (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005), the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) essentially describes how individuals read, manipulate, and adjust their social setting through four dimensions. Individuals who have higher **social astuteness** are strong at observing others and interpreting interactions between and with other people, indicating they have a higher level of social network understanding and self-awareness. Actively scanning their environment, persons with higher political skill have been shown to adjust behaviors to meet circumstances (McAllister et al., 2018). **Interpersonal influence** demonstrates individuals' powerful ability to influence others.

**Table 1**  
Representative Political Skill and Performance Articles.

Publication	Sample Description	PS Findings	Key PS Managerial Implication
(Ahearn et al., 2004) JMGT	Managers University Administrators	PS explained team performance	PS can be developed and born disposition. Recruitment suggestions.
Balkundi & Harrison, 2006 AMJ	Meta-analysis	Social networks impact viability and performance	Leaders with close intragroup ties perform higher.
Blickle, Wendel & Ferris, 2010 JVB	Car salespeople	High PS, greater extraversion, linked to sales, lower PS, more extraversion tied to fewer sales.	PS assisted performance who were extraverted, but low PS.
Brouer, Chiu & Wang, 2016 JMP	Supervisors, subordinates	PS-follower performance mediated by transformational leadership	More effective leadership training.
Chaker, Zablah & Noble, 2018 IMM	Salespeople	PS boundary situation regulates persistence effectiveness.	Coaching, advising and training of salespeople related to persistence.
Crawford et al., 2019 HP	Supervisor, subordinates	PS helps evade harmful ratings via high politics perceptions	In nonpolitical organizations, PS does not defend deviant behavior.
Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005 JMGT	Undergraduates, HR employees, administrators, branch managers	Validation of political skill Inventory (PSI). PS linked to political savvy, emotional intelligence, self-monitoring, negatively to trait anxiety.	PS predict work outcomes (performance) and facilitate influence tactics/outcomes.
Gansen-Ammann, et al., 2019 GOM	Supervisors, subordinates	High demand manager's workers' performance ranking increases as PS escalates.	PS helps managerial performance.
García-Chas et al., 2019 JLOS	Engineers, managers	PS related to firm support.	Recruitment and development with PS.
Harris et al., 2007 JAP	Subordinate, supervisor	High levels tactics by PS obtained better manager ratings than those lacking PS.	PS training. Organizations should reward desired behaviors, not impression management.
Kacmar et al., 2013 JBE	Supervisors, employees	Ethical leadership, helping and ratings PS moderates.	PS employees view political environment as opportunity to use their skills.
Kalra et al., 2017 JPSSM	Salespeople	PS linked to seller creative performance and identification with firm.	PS (+) relationship with creative performance and organizational identification
Kim, Karatepe & Chung, 2019 LJCHM	Employees	PS lessens role stress, job tension, cultivates performance.	Training and recruitment. Hire high PS and train PS in employees.
Kimura, Bande, & Fernández-Ferrín, 2019 IMM	Salespeople and supervisors	Adaptive selling impacts on performance greatest when intrinsic motivation and PS are high.	Managerial led development of PS as intra-organizational skill for salespeople.
	Salespeople		

**Table 1 (continued)**

Publication	Sample Description	PS Findings	Key PS Managerial Implication
Li, Sun & Cheng, 2017 JBE		PS impacts satisfaction and outcomes through resources, seller-customer guanxi	Application of "guanxi." Training PS.
Lvina et al., 2018 JMGT	Teams students, business teams;	PS applies to teams.	PS impacts teamwork in a social context.
Munyon et al., 2015 PP	Meta-analysis -Google Scholar databases	PS (+) related to work and career outcomes	PS managerial applications. PS individual difference trait that can be developed.
Treadway et al., 2013 JMGT	Employees at two Industries	Performance and PS interact to impact power assessment.	Strong performers may not get recognized, the benefit of firms if managers have PS.
Zinko, 2013 JASP	Employees	Mediating impact reputation with strain reactions and PS.	PS individuals can use positive reputation to obtain greater rewards and influence.

*Note:* Journal abbreviations: AMJ = Academy of Management Journal; GOM = Group & Organization Management; HP = Human Performance; LJCHM = International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management; IMM = Industrial Marketing Management; JAP = Journal of Applied Psychology; JASP = Journal of Applied Social Psychology; JBE = Journal of Business Ethics; JLOS = Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies; JMGT = Journal of Management; JMP = Journal of Managerial Psychology; JPSSM = Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management; JVB = Journal of Vocational Behavior; PP = Personnel Psychology.

They adapt to social situations to enhance their goals. The **ability to network** reflects the degree to which people are skilled at managing diverse networks and contacts. They recognize key, resource-heavy organizational contacts and make connections with these counterparts. Skilled in alliance building, they create friendships and take advantage of resources these contacts create. They tend to be good at deal-making, conflict management, and negotiation. Illustrations include those who have strong internal bonds within an organization and from this have access to more information and can recognize opportunities from this knowledge (McAllister et al., 2018). **Apparent sincerity** enables resource transference because individuals with higher apparent sincerity are seen as authentic, genuine, and forthright. They seem honest, which is critical because their sincerity signifies honorable intentions. These individuals inspire confidence and trust because their actions are not seen as coercive or manipulative (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005).

2.2. Political skill and customer-relationship-building competence

Customer relationship building has been recognized as important in generating value for salespeople (Kim & Wang, 2019) and the firm (Miao, Evans, & Li, 2017). The ability of personal customer interactions to establish/maintain competence in building customer relationships also has been shown as applicable between buyers and sellers (Itani, Goad, & Jaramillo, 2019). Introducing factors that enhance relationship-building competencies (e.g., Lin & Malhotra, 2012) is therefore potentially beneficial to sellers. Political skill represents such an opportunity but has chiefly been presented in the context of internal organizational dynamics.

Limited research of political skill has recently seen application in sales environments. For example, Kimura et al. (2019) found the positive effects of adaptive selling on sales performance are highest when both

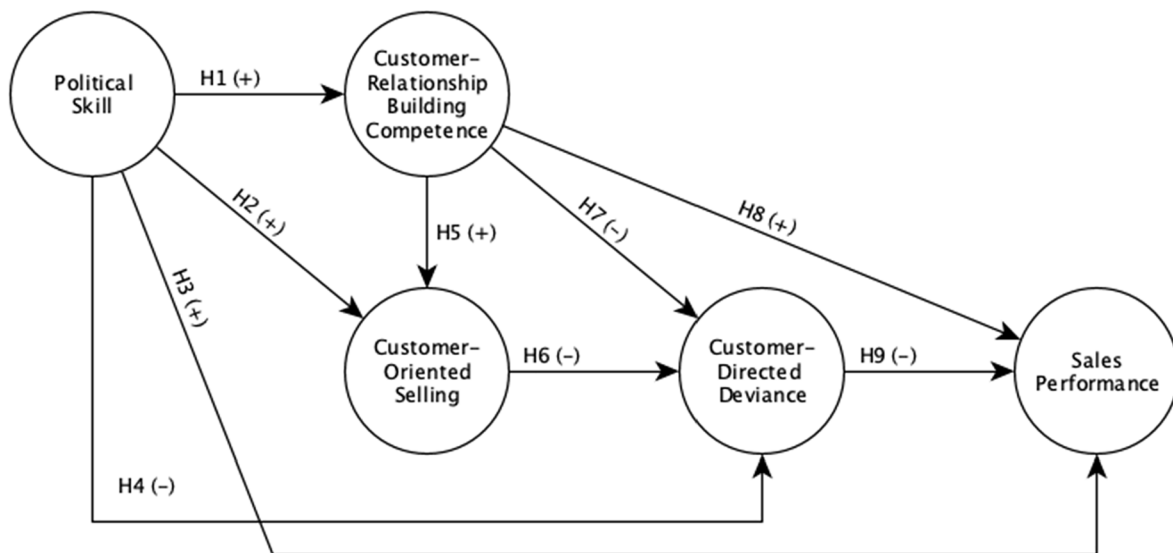


Fig. 1. Hypothesized Relationships Among Study Variables.

political skill and intrinsic motivation are highest. Li et al. (2017) linked political skill to aspects of Chinese financial services performance and job satisfaction. Perhaps most significantly, Schwepker and Good (2021) found a positive relationship between political skill and customer-relationship building competence, and as such we include and test this relationship in our model for completeness. Thus,

**H1.** There is a positive relationship between political skill and customer-relationship-building competence.

### 2.3. Political skill and customer-oriented selling

Both political skill and customer-oriented selling involve distinct and beneficial interactions with customers. Political skill is an *interpersonal* characteristic (Perrewé et al., 2000) that reflects one's ability to understand and influence others (Ferris et al., 2007) as well as recognize social competencies (Frieder & Basik, 2017; etc.). Customer-oriented selling represents a different perspective of customer interactions, not based on interpersonal communication skills (i.e., as is political skill), but on beliefs and behaviors on customer directionality, or how buyers should be engaged by sellers. Customer-oriented selling represents a commitment to understand and satisfy the long-term interests and needs of customers (Saxe & Weitz, 1982), embracing buyer engagement throughout the sales cycle (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011). Customer-oriented selling is a widely recognized selling perspective (Hughes, Richards, Calantone, Baldus, & Spreng, 2019; etc.) tied to key outcomes (Bateman & Valentine, 2015). Consequently, the importance of identifying customer-oriented selling antecedents (Gerlach, Rödiger, Stock, & Zacharias, 2016) provides potentially important linkages with political skill.

Influenced by internal and external factors (Feng, Wang, Lawton, & Luo, 2019), political skill and customer-oriented selling are both advantageous (Varela, Bande, Del Rio, & Jaramillo, 2019). The premise of this hypothesis is political skill reflects understanding others, and customer-oriented selling is a focus on interests and behaviors that will benefit the other party. Political skill occurs when the salesperson employs interpersonal qualities to skillfully understand buyers (Gansen-Ammann et al., 2019) and influence their actions (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005). Subsequently, the seller can then seek commitments and actions through appropriate behaviors to satisfy a customer-oriented selling focus on the customer's long-term needs. Political skill in this context is an interpersonal mechanism by which salespeople become engaged and committed behaviorally long-term to the customer through customer-

oriented selling. Therefore we expect

**H2.** There is a positive relationship between political skill and customer-oriented selling.

### 2.4. Political skill and sales performance

Connections associating political skill and individual performance have been recognized in a variety of contexts and roles (e.g., De Clercq et al., 2019; García-Chas et al., 2019). Political skill is linked to aspects of performance in financial services (Li, Sun, & Cheng, 2017), relationship performance (Kalra et al., 2017), and adaptive selling (Kimura, Bande, & Fernández-Ferrín, 2019).

Previous research addressing political skill and performance has not considered the direct and indirect links of ethical behavior, nor customer relationship competence. Therefore, we propose salespeople's political skill significantly impacts their sales performance and reflects the responsibilities to their firm (e.g., increase company revenue, sell profitable products, and maintain major accounts) as well as to the customer. Complementing the previous intra-organizational research by extending this analysis to external relationships with customers and extending the limited studies related to the sales effort, we suggest the politically skilled business-to-business salesperson can better understand, persuade, and direct customers to mutually advantageous decisions. Lane & Piercy (2009) note organizations have to alter how they manage and prepare to satisfy increasingly complicated customer needs. Consequently, political skill offers salespeople a means for managing and meeting customer needs to fulfill performance goals. Thus,

**H3.** There is a positive relationship between political skill and sales performance.

### 2.5. Political skill and customer-directed deviance

Ferris, Davidson, et al.(2005) proffer political skill allows one to assess, sway, alter social settings and establish trust and confidence while not being perceived as coercive or manipulative (Ferris et al., 2007). The latter is important because it suggests the influencing capability of political skill should not be perceived as unethical.

While the sales and ethics literature provides evidence of the importance of ethical behavior as tied to sales outcomes, only limited studies have investigated "customer-directed deviance" which occurs when a salesperson purposefully "commits any voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so threatens the



well-being of its customers” (e.g., Darrat, Amyx, & Bennett, 2010, p. 6). Focusing on acts (such as exaggerating benefits, using coercion or deception to obtain a sale, and intentionally selling flawed products) that are designed to make the sale regardless of the detriment to customers, encompass customer-directed deviance (Darrat, Amyx, & Bennett, 2017).

Widely identified in organizations (e.g., Dabholkar & Kellaris, 1992), the ongoing prevalence of seller misdeeds (Rostami, Gabler, & Agnihotri, 2019; Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006b) raises the importance of understanding customer-directed-deviance and factors such as political skill that have not been linked. We propose here that the positive potential of political skill (Frieder & Basik, 2017) indicates it can be used to constructively affect others. For example, political skill mitigates workplace ostracism (Yang & Treadway, 2018), altering undesired behaviors. Workers possessing strong political skill view the environment opportunistically, and as a setting to use their skills to reduce uncertainty and develop more control (Kacmar et al., 2013). In essence, salespeople who possess political skill are believed to use it to create the “right customer path.” Those successfully employing political skill (not coercive or manipulative) would be less likely to commit customer-directed deviant actions as these are detrimental to customers. Therefore, we expect

**H4.** There is an inverse relationship between political skill and frequency of customer-directed deviance.

#### 2.6. Customer-relationship-building competence and customer-oriented selling

Previous research proposed the importance of both customer-oriented selling and building long-term customer relationships (cf., Schwepker, 2003). Salespeople who adopt a customer orientation rely on the notion that sellers’ beliefs and values should be directed towards the best interests of customers while placing importance on satisfying their needs (Chakravarty, Kumar, & Grewal, 2014; etc.). For example, customer-oriented salespeople tend to not focus customer attention on products just because they are only beneficial to the seller (Hughes et al., 2019). This underscores customer-oriented selling as an effective strategy through the buying process (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011) in which customer-oriented behaviors represent a long-term focus that can shape customer actions. None of the previous research examined this relationship when political skill preceded the development of customer relationship building.

We include this relationship in our model to confirm its support when influenced by salesperson political skill. One would expect salespeople who possess the skills to forge customer relationships (i.e., customer-relationship-building competence), would be more likely to use selling behaviors (cf., Schwepker, 2003) focused on providing long-term customer satisfaction (i.e., customer-oriented selling). The acceptance of this perspective rests with the belief that customer-oriented selling generates a marketplace differential advantage (Yang & Tsai, 2019). Therefore, we suggest

**H5.** There is a positive relationship between customer-relationship-building competence and customer-oriented selling.

#### 2.7. Customer-oriented selling and customer-directed deviance

Sellers who attempt to increase long-term client satisfaction have been shown to avoid behaviors, not in the buyer’s best interest (Wachner, Plouffe, & Gregoire, 2009). This suggests that salespeople who are highly customer-oriented (and long-term focused) are concerned for themselves and others (Schwepker & Good, 2011) and would emphasize long-term needs and satisfaction that are mutually important to both buyers and sellers.

As mentioned earlier, only limited research has focused on customer-directed deviance as part of the ethics literature. Two of these studies did

not include the impact on deviance from adopting a customer-oriented selling approach (Darrat et al., 2010, 2017). We however propose an inverse link between customer-oriented selling and customer-directed deviance. We expect customer-oriented selling to be associated with less frequent customer-directed deviance. Our logic suggests actions that are right/wrong for the customer are actions that relate to the development of long-term customer relationships. For example, salespeople who are high in the quality of seeing others from their perspective (high allocentric) define themselves and behave according to their group’s cultural norms and feel a moral duty to satisfy the needs of others (Lam, Chen, & Schaubroeck, 2002). Associations between relationship building and allocentrism by salespeople (Bradford, Liu, Shi, Weitz, & Xu, 2019) signify more customer-oriented selling will be tied to less customer-directed deviant behaviors. We propose

**H6.** There is an inverse relationship between salespeople’s use of customer-oriented selling and their frequency of customer-directed deviance.

#### 2.8. Customer-relationship-building competence and customer-directed deviance

The behaviors of salespeople can directly affect their external organizational interactions (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006b) reminding sellers of the value of effectively managing customer relationships as key productivity generators. Yet, while developing customer relationships, salespeople face ethical challenges to complete transactions in the short term. Because sales work is often outside the office (and away from the watchful eye of a supervisor) and can be coupled with demanding quotas, the temptation to commit deviant behavior may be substantial. Given that customer-directed deviance is both prevalent and costly to organizations (Lo Iacono, Weaven, & Griffin, 2016), its presence and impactful negative consequences (e.g., Darrat et al., 2017) remain important for investigation with other sales aspects.

A relationship-building focus may discourage sellers from committing deviant behaviors that may harm the customer. In fact, recent research finds a negative relationship between customer-relationship-building competence and customer-directed deviance (Schwepker & Good, 2021). Thus, for model completeness, we include and test the following relationship in this study.

**H7.** There is an inverse relationship between the frequency of customer-relationship-building competence and customer-directed deviance.

#### 2.9. Customer-relationship-building competence and sales performance

Positive sales outcomes are based on thoughtful, strategic processes, decisions, and actions designed by sellers to build relationships between business entities (Wathne, Heide, Mooi, & Kumar, 2018). Business-to-business buyer–seller relationships have particularly critical long-term requirements (Gupta, Kumar, Grewal, & Lilien, 2019). These long-term requirements may create various challenges (Wood, 2019) where sellers have to adjust (Schmitz, Friess, Alavi, & Habel, 2020), or the relationship and ultimately their performance will be negatively impacted.

Our rationale for including this link between customer-relationship-building competence and sales performance in this study is supported by previous research indicating building customer relationships should result in improved performance (Munksgaard & Frandsen, 2019, etc.). The direct and moderating impact of political skill on stress, tension, and outcomes was studied in restaurants (Kim, Karatepe, & Chung, 2019) and how to measure B2B relationship value to increase satisfaction and loyalty was estimated (Ruiz-Martínez, Frasquet, & Gil-Saura, 2019). Neither of these studies assessed the link between relationship building and seller performance (Miao, Evans, & Li, 2017) which supports our further investigation of these two aspects in business-to-business

marketing. Thus,

**H8.** There is a positive relationship between customer-relationship-building competence and sales performance.

2.10. Customer-directed deviance and sales performance

The vastness of wrongful acts (Rostami, et al., 2019) suggests customer-directed deviance commonly occurs in the sales environment, especially due to the high emphasis on quantifiable performance results. The more frequently the deviant behaviors are utilized, the more likely they could impact the seller’s sales performance. Some research has primarily focused on motivations of deviance (Hochstein, Lilly & Stanley, 2017). We propose in this study to focus specifically on the impact of customer-direct deviance on sales performance, which typically involves activities related to generating sales (Plouffe, 2018) because understanding factors impacting sales performance in a business-to-business setting is important.

Although limited, empirical evidence suggests a negative relationship exists between customer-directed deviance and sales performance. Broadly speaking, salespeople perform better when they comprehend their company’s ethical policies (Weeks & Nantel, 1992). One study of salespeople found a positive relationship between ethical behavior and share of customer (Hansen & Riggle, 2009), suggesting that ethical behavior results in greater salesperson performance. Evidence shows a positive relationship between business-to-business salespeople’s moral judgment and sales performance (Schwepker & Good, 2021, 2013; Schwepker & Ingram 1996). Ethical behavior has been demonstrated to be positively related to sales performance (Agnihotri and Krush 2015) while unethical intent, a precursor to unethical behavior, negatively affects salesperson performance (Schwepker, 2015). As a form of unethical behavior, customer-directed deviance represents similar potentially damaging conduct towards customers. For example, salespeople engaging in unacceptable behavior negatively impacts their performance (Ferrell, Johnston, Marshall, & Ferrell, 2019). When a salesperson uses deception (Darrat et al., 2017) to obtain a sale it would be considered deviant if it harms the customer. If discovered, the deviance, as with other types of unethical behavior, may result in current or future lost sales. Therefore,

**H9.** There is an inverse relationship between the frequency of customer-directed deviance and sales performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

The data used in this study was part of a larger data collection whereby a national data broker was contracted to obtain a nationwide electronic data collection survey utilizing their online platform

(Chandler, Rosenzweig, Moss, Robinson, & Litman, 2019). An email was sent to 8,828 salespeople in the organization’s database inviting them to participate in the survey (with new invitations sent approximately every 8 hours when recruitment was live). This led to 556 salespeople accessing the online survey (see Table 3 for questionnaire scale items). Of these, 262 respondents were eliminated after answering the first survey question which was used to determine if the salesperson was employed full-time in business-to-business sales. Of the remaining sample of 294, four respondents were eliminated for not fully completing the survey, another for having zero years of sales experience (the respondent indicated he/she worked in human resources), and 49 failed an attention check and were removed, leaving a final sample of 240 business-to-business salespeople who received a small incentive from the data collection agency for participating. Given the database from which the sample was drawn included both B2C and B2B salespeople, we estimated the response rate. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates approximately 14% of salespeople are B2B. Therefore we estimate only 1,236 (14%) of the database were B2B salespeople. Based on this number, our response rate is approximately 19.4%. Results from a time-trend extrapolation test in which early and late respondents were compared across demographic and study variables found no statistically significant differences (F = 1.16, significance F = 0.06) suggesting nonresponse bias is likely not a problem (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

The sample is comprised of mostly unmarried (52.9%) female (52.5%) college-educated (32.1% have a bachelor’s degree; 13.8% have a graduate degree; 13.8% have a two-year degree; 23.3% have at least some college) salespeople whose average age is 39.1 years and median income is \$55,000. On average, salespeople have 11.0 years of sales experience and a majority (45.8%) sell both goods and services, while 34.2 percent sell principally physical goods, and the remainder (20.0%) sell mainly services. The average ratio of fixed to variable income is 59.6%. Respondents work in a variety of industries selling for service (37.5%), wholesaling (26.7%), manufacturing (22.5%), government (2.9%), nonprofit (0.8%) and “other” (9.6%) organizations.

3.2. Operationalization of study variables

Salesperson’s *political skill* (PS) was assessed using a 12-item scale used by Bolander et al. (2015) who adapted it from Ferris, Treadway, et al. (2005). It consists of four components (social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity) measuring one’s political skill. Salespeople’s *customer-relationship-building competence* (CRBC) was measured with a four-item scale adapted from Miao, Evans, & Li (2017) and Hunter & Perreault (2007). Each of these measures used a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (7) “strongly agree”. *Customer-directed deviance* (CDD) (Darrat, Amyx & Bennett, 2010; 2017), which assesses the frequency with which a salesperson engaged in deviant behaviors directed

**Table 2**  
Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities and Intercorrelation Matrix of Constructs in the Study.

	PS	CRBC	CDD	COS	SP	AGE	S_EXP	Gen
Mean	5.79	6.02	2.05	6.06	5.37	39.41	11.02	0.53
Stand Dev	1.12	0.94	1.69	0.87	1.05	11.70	8.89	0.50
PS	(0.96)							
CRBC	0.41**	(0.85)						
CDD	-0.08	-0.30**	(0.98)					
COS	0.43**	0.57**	-0.31**	(0.88)				
SP	0.48**	0.53**	-0.01	0.41**	(0.91)			
AGE	0.10	0.10	-0.24**	0.21**	-0.02			
S_EXP	0.08	0.12	-0.24**	0.18**	-0.01	0.69**		
Gender	-0.06	0.07	-0.24**	0.16**	-0.05	-0.05	0.00	

PS = Political Skill; CRBC = Customer-relationship-building Competence; CDD = Customer-Directed Deviance; COS = Customer-Oriented Selling; SP = Sales Performance; Age; S\_Exp = Sales Experience; Gen = Gender (male = 0, female = 1).

\*\* significant at p ≤ 0.01; \*significant at p ≤ 0.05.

**Table 3**  
Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results: Factor Loadings and t-Values.

Political Skill (Bolander et al., 2015; Ferris et al., 2005) (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)	Factor Loading	t-Value
<b>Social Astuteness</b>	<b>0.933</b>	_____ <sup>a</sup>
PS1 I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others.	0.691	_____
PS2 I understand people very well.	0.860	12.13
PS3 I have good intuition or “savvy” about how to present myself to others.	0.876	12.33
<b>Interpersonal Influence</b>	<b>0.994</b>	<b>10.91</b>
PS4 I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others.	0.811	_____
PS5 I am good at getting people to like me.	0.871	16.17
PS6 It is easy for me to develop a good rapport with most people.	0.842	15.37
<b>Networking Ability</b>	<b>0.938</b>	<b>11.16</b>
PS7 I am good at building relationships with influential people at work.	0.874	_____
PS8 I am good at using my connections and networking to make things happen at work.	0.915	20.40
PS9 I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others.	0.854	17.84
<b>Apparent Sincerity</b>	<b>0.857</b>	<b>10.28</b>
PS10 I try to show a genuine interest in other people.	0.857	_____
PS11 It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do.	0.846	16.33
PS12 When communicating with others, I try to be genuine in what I say and do.	0.878	17.30
<b>Customer-relationship-building Competence (Hunter &amp; Perreault, 2007; Miao, Evans &amp; Li, 2017)</b> (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)		
CRBC1 I listen attentively to identify and understand the real concerns of my customers.	0.686	_____
CRBC2 I work out solutions to customers’ questions or objections.	0.753	10.34
CRBC3 I work with customers to help them improve their profitability.	0.814	11.02
CRBC4 I work with buyers to develop a partnership that’s profitable to both parties.	0.835	11.24
<b>Customer-Directed Deviance (Darrat, Amyx &amp; Bennett, 2010; 2017)</b> (Within the last year, how frequently have you done the following? 1 = Never to 7 = Daily)		
CDD1 I have used deception to make a sale.	0.918	_____
CDD2 I have knowingly sold a defective product/service.	0.934	26.34
CDD3 I have intentionally delayed an order to punish a customer.	0.937	26.61
CDD4 I have used coercion on a customer to get an order.	0.894	23.02
CDD5 I have provided poor service to a customer based on his/her ability/inability to pay.	0.953	28.27
CDD6 I have made an ethnic, religious, or racial remark to a customer.	0.948	27.71
<b>Customer-Oriented Selling (Thomas, Soutar &amp; Ryan, 2001)</b> (1 = True for none of your customers to 7 = True for ALL of your customers)		
COS1 I try to get customers to discuss their needs with me.	0.722	_____
COS2 A good salesperson has to have the customer’s best interests in mind.	0.710	10.47
COS3 I try to bring a customer with a problem together with a product that helps solve that problem.	0.862	12.63
COS4 I offer the product of mine that is best suited to the customer’s problem.	0.810	11.94
COS5 I try to find out what kind of product would be most helpful to a customer.	0.749	11.06
<b>Sales Performance (Sujan, Weitz &amp; Kumar, 1994)</b> (relative to other salespeople 1 = much worse to 7 = much better)		
SP1 Contribution to your company’s market share.	0.659	_____
SP2 Selling high profit margin products.	0.764	10.41
SP3 Generating a high level of dollar sales.	0.853	11.39
	0.811	10.93

**Table 3 (continued)**

Political Skill (Bolander et al., 2015; Ferris et al., 2005) (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)	Factor Loading	t-Value
SP4 Quickly generating sales of new company products.		
SP5 Identifying and cultivating major accounts in your territory.	0.850	11.36
SP6 Exceeding sales targets.	0.767	10.44
<u>SP7 Assisting your supervising manager in meeting his or her goals.</u>	<u>0.706</u>	<u>9.74</u>

Notes: <sup>a</sup>constrained to 1.0; p < 0.001 for each factor loading; CFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.07,  $\chi^2 = 1,077.94$ , df = 513, p = .000; PS = Political Skill; CRBC = Customer-Relationship-Building Competence; CDD = Customer-Directed Deviance; COS = Customer-Oriented Selling; SP = Sales Performance.

at customers *within the past year*, consisted of a seven-item measure using the following scale ranging from (1) “never” to (7) “daily.” *Customer-oriented selling* (COS) was assessed using the five customer-oriented items from a reduced ten-item version of the *Saxe & Weitz (1982)* SOCO scale developed by *Thomas, Soutar & Ryan (2001)*. Participants responded to the items using a seven-point scale anchored with (1) “True for none of your customers” and (7) “True for ALL of your customers”. Finally, *sales performance* (SP) was measured with a seven-item measure developed by *Sujan, Weitz & Kumar (1994)* that was adapted from *Behrman & Perreault’s (1982)* measure of sales performance. It determines the extent to which salespeople achieve quantity and quality sales objectives. Using a scale ranging from (1) “much worse” to (7) “much better”, salespeople were asked to evaluate how well they believe their current level of performance is in various areas relative to other salespeople in their organization. Considerable empirical evidence supports the validity of self-reports of performance, finding them significantly correlated with objective judgments made by observers (*Churchill, Ford, Hartley, & Walker, 1985; Schneider, Ashforth, Higgs, & Carr, 1996*).

**3.3. Measure assessment**

Each measurement scale has a *Cronbach (1951)* alpha above 0.70, suggesting acceptable reliability (*Nunnally, 1978*). Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations for the study’s constructs are in *Table 2*.

The validity of the measures was tested using confirmatory factor analysis with AMOS 25. *Table 3* provides parameter estimates that are statistically significant indicating convergent validity (*Anderson & Gerbing, 1988*). Moreover, the average variance extracted for each construct surpasses a recommended critical value of 0.50, providing additional evidence of convergent validity (*Fornell & Larcker, 1981*).

**Table 4**

Discriminant Validity: Average Variance Extracted, Shared Variance, Confidence Interval.

	Shared Variance	Confidence Interval
PS (0.722) <sup>a</sup> ↔ SP (0.602)	0.271	0.113 to 0.429
PS ↔ COS (0.606)	0.212	0.088 to 0.336
PS ↔ CDD (0.866)	0.007	-0.209 to 0.209
PS ↔ CRBC (0.599)	0.209	0.232 to 0.476
CDD ↔ CRBC	0.107	-0.069 to 0.069
CDD ↔ SP	0.001	-0.189 to 0.189
CDD ↔ COS	0.115	-0.063 to 0.063
CRBC ↔ COS	0.398	0.294 to 0.502
CRBC ↔ SP	0.354	0.232 to 0.476
COS ↔ SP	0.354	0.104 to 0.324

PS = Political Skill; CRBC = Customer-Relationship-Building Competence; CDD = Customer-Directed Deviance; COS = Customer-Oriented Selling; SP = Sales Performance.

<sup>a</sup> The average variance extracted for each construct is in parentheses.

Table 4 provides support for the discriminant validity of the constructs. First, the correlations between each pair of study constructs do not contain the value of 1.0 at a 95 percent confidence interval (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Second, for each measurement construct the average variance extracted is larger than its shared variance with every other study construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The variance inflation factor (VIF) was examined for each variable in the model to evaluate multicollinearity. The highest VIF is 1.87 ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ) for CRBC, well under the suggested cutoff value of 10.0, indicating little or no multicollinearity exists (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006).

Various steps were taken to manage common method variance. First, to avoid common method bias survey participants were afforded anonymity and were informed there are no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire included unambiguous scale items, separated the constructs, and avoided bipolar numerical scale values (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Second, using confirmatory factor analysis, each of the measurement scale items was allowed to load on a single factor. The model's poor fit statistics ( $\chi^2 = 4,832.67$ ,  $df = 527$ ,  $p = .000$ , CFI = 0.41, NFI = 0.38, RMSEA = 0.19) suggest common method variance is not a serious problem (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Regardless, to control for any possible common method variance, when estimating the structural model each indicator could load on a latent common method factor allowing the response variance to be partitioned into three components: trait, method, and random error (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This technique has been used in investigations with self-report measures (e.g., Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009; Dimitriou & Schwepker, 2019; Schwepker & Good, 2017).

#### 4. Analysis and results

The hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling with AMOS 25. Age and sales experience, both found to affect sales performance (Churchill et al., 1985), were used in the analysis to control for sources of variation outside the hypothesized relationships. To account for any differences between males and females, we also used gender as a control variable. Based on the fit statistics provided in Table 5, the model adequately fits the data (see Hair et al., 2006 for suggested fit

**Table 5**  
Final Path Model - Standardized Structural Parameter Estimates.

Path	Hypothesis		Coeff.	R <sup>2</sup>
PS → CRBC	H <sub>1</sub> (+)	accept	0.460***	0.215
Gender → CRBC			0.105	
PS → COS	H <sub>2</sub> (+)	accept	0.254***	0.515
CRBC → COS	H <sub>5</sub> (+)	accept	0.541***	
Gender → COS			0.167**	
PS → SP	H <sub>3</sub> (+)	accept	0.297***	0.474
CRBC → SP	H <sub>8</sub> (+)	accept	0.522***	
CDD → SP	H <sub>9</sub> (-)	reject	0.144*	
Age → SP			-0.070	
S EXP → SP			-0.015	
Gender → SP			-0.033	
PS → CDD	H <sub>4</sub> (-)	reject	0.122	0.187
COS → CDD	H <sub>6</sub> (-)	accept	-0.240*	
CRBC → CDD	H <sub>7</sub> (-)	accept	-0.211*	
Gender → CDD			-0.173**	
Gender → PS			-0.077	0.006
Goodness-of-fit Statistics:	$\chi^2 = 1,062.55$ $df = 578$ , $p = .000$ CFI = 0.94 NFI = 0.87 RMSEA = 0.06			

PS = Political Skill; CRBC = Customer-Relationship-Building Competence; CDD = Customer-Directed Deviance; COS = Customer-Oriented Selling; SP = Sales Performance; S EXP = Sales Experience.  
\*\*\* p < 0.001; \*\* p < 0.01; \* p < 0.05.

statistics).

Hypothesis one proposing a positive relationship between salesperson political skill and customer-relationship-building competence is supported (beta = 0.460,  $p < .001$ ) as previously supported by Schwepker and Good (2021). Likewise, political skill is positively related to customer-oriented selling as expected in H2 (beta = 0.254,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, salespeople's use of political skill is positively related to their sales performance (H3, beta = 0.297,  $p < .001$ ). However, contrary to what was expected in H4 political skill is not significantly related to customer-directed deviance. As hypothesized in H5, salespeople's customer-relationship-building competence is positively related to customer-oriented selling (beta = 0.541,  $p < .001$ ). H6, which proposed a negative relationship between customer-oriented selling and customer-directed deviance is confirmed (beta = -0.240,  $p < .05$ ). As previously found by Schwepker and Good (2021), we find salespeople's customer-relationship-building competence is negatively related to their customer-directed deviance (H7, beta = -0.211,  $p < .05$ ). A positive relationship between salespeople's customer-relationship-building competence and their sales performance is confirmed as expected in H8 (beta = 0.522,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, although a significant relationship exists between salespeople's customer-directed deviance and their sales performance, H9 is rejected because the relationship is positive rather than the expected negative (beta = 0.144,  $p < .05$ ).

To determine if mediation exists, a bootstrapping technique (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was used. This involves estimating indirect effects by repeatedly sampling from the data set. Results show customer-relationship-building competence partially mediates the relationships between political skill and both customer-oriented selling (beta = 0.249,  $p < .01$ ), and sales performance (beta = 0.226,  $p < .01$ ). Both customer-oriented selling and customer-relationship-building competence fully mediate the relationship between political skill and customer-directed deviance (beta = -0.218,  $p < .01$ ). Customer-directed deviance partially mediates the relationship between customer-relationship-building competence and sales performance (beta = -0.049,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, customer-directed deviance fully mediates the relationship between customer-oriented selling and sales performance (beta = -0.035,  $p < .05$ ).

#### 5. Discussion and implications

The results of the hypotheses and overall model (Fig. 1) provide valuable theoretical and managerial implications for a network of relationships that to our knowledge previously have not been examined and offer several significant contributions to the research literature. The overall model provides insight into the role of political skill in influencing business-to-business salespeople's customer-oriented selling, relationship-building competence, ethical behavior, and sales performance. This research extends political skill beyond intra-organizational skills (Gansen-Ammann et al., 2019; etc.) and performance (Lvina et al., 2018; etc.) to address impacts and valuable external sales outcomes. Business-to-business salespeople who report higher levels of political skill focus on customer-oriented selling and relationship building with customers and also report higher levels of performance on quantitative aspects of performance (e.g., contribution to company's market share, selling high-profit margin products, generating sales dollars, etc.).

We grow our knowledge of factors impacting unethical salesperson behavior as provided in models of ethical decision making (cf., Schwartz 2016). We find political skill can negatively indirectly influence salespeople's use of customer-directed deviance through both customer-oriented selling and customer-relationship-building competence. We learn specifically that customer-directed deviance is negatively related to both customer-oriented selling and customer-relationship-building competence, providing us with deeper insight for managing and controlling unethical salesforce behavior.

We add to our understanding of both customer-oriented selling and relationship building in sales. Political skill and customer-relationship-



building competence can positively impact salespeople's use of customer-oriented selling, which is negatively related to customer-directed deviance. Further, the findings reinforce the notion those skilled at building relationships are less likely to participate in behaviors that might be construed as unethical by buyers (Román & Ruiz, 2005).

These findings also suggest sellers recognizing the importance of both relationship building and performance can purposefully design internal political skill development programs (recruitment, training, coaching, etc.) to advance customer relational and performance outcomes. Further, the ability of political skill to provide “users” other internal benefits (e.g., eases job tension and stress- Kim et al., 2019) in demanding sales positions, suggests multiple gains are possible.

As expected in H1, salespeople's political skill positively affects their customer-relationship-building competence. The current finding extends the reach of political skill beyond the organization to its customers. Because politically skilled individuals come across as authentic, genuine, and forthright, they appear honest and as such are able to establish trust (Ferris et al., 2007), which is a critical factor in relationship building (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987). In addition, being socially astute, politically skilled salespeople can get along with various buyers and adjust their behaviors to help develop relationships with them. By developing salespeople's political skill, the sales organization can provide salespeople with skills that will enable them to not only successfully navigate their organization, but to build and strengthen relationships with customers.

Results suggest politically skilled salespeople are adept at customer-oriented selling (H2). Consistent with Kimura (2015), we find political skill can be applied between entities, rather than simply internally, as the skilled salesperson is likely to use interpersonal qualities (i.e., political skill) to understand buyers and influence their direction (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005) to satisfy their needs (i.e., customer-oriented selling). Given the significance of customer-oriented selling (Schwepker, 2003) and the importance of understanding its antecedents (Gerlach et al., 2016), this finding aids in understanding a means for fostering or improving the use of customer-oriented selling among salespeople.

Per hypothesis three, salesperson political skill is positively related to sales performance, furthering our understanding of both factors affecting sales performance, as well as types of performance (in this case “sales performance” which often differs from other internally generated types of performance in organizations) influenced by political skill. Political skill may enhance salespeople's achievement of various sales outcomes (e.g., sales dollars, profit margins, products sold, etc.). This makes sense if one considers the politically skilled individual cannot only influence customers through relationship building but has the ability to build internal networks (e.g., in shipping, financing, warehousing, etc.) within the seller's organization which might be tapped to best satisfy customer needs. Moreover, politically skilled individuals are keen negotiators who instill in others trust due to their authentic, genuine, and forthright demeanor.

We failed to confirm H4 that hypothesized a negative relationship between salesperson political skill and customer-directed deviance. Nevertheless, we found a negative indirect relationship between political skill and customer-directed deviance through both customer relationship building competence and customer-oriented selling. Politically skilled salespeople tend to be competent at building customer relationships and using customer-oriented selling and as such are less likely to direct deviant behaviors toward customers. This makes sense as the former two actions would likely help in building long-term customer relationships while deviant behaviors would not.

As anticipated in H5, salespeople's customer-relationship-building competence is positively related to their use of customer-oriented selling, adding to our knowledge of factors associated with customer-oriented selling. Because salespeople who practice customer-oriented selling are less likely to participate in customer-directed deviance, steps should be taken to encourage the use of customer-oriented selling.

For starters, salespeople in need of developing their customer-relationship-building competence would benefit from being mentored by salespeople high in this skill. Coaching and training should focus on developing listening skills, effectively addressing questions and overcoming objections, and understanding the financial consequences to customers from adopting the seller's proposition. In addition, given research showing an ethical climate can positively influence salespeople's customer orientation (Schwepker & Good, 2004), effort should be taken to create an ethical climate by developing and implementing ethical codes and policies, as well as reprimanding those who behave unethically (Schwepker & Good, 2004). This may help curb salespeople's use of political skill in an inappropriate manner with customers. It should be emphasized to salespeople that unethical actions which only result in short-term gain (e.g., deception to make a sale to meet an impending quota) will not be tolerated, as they typically come at the expense of long-term customer relationships.

Salesperson customer-relationship-building competence is negatively related to salesperson customer-directed deviant behavior (H7). This finding augments ethical decision-making models in sales (Ferrell et al., 2019) by tying an important antecedent, salesperson customer-relationship-building competence, to unethical decisions, reinforcing the importance of developing and nurturing salespeople's customer-relationship-building skills. These same skills lead to positive salesperson performance.

Contrary to expectations with H9, customer-directed deviance is not negatively related to sales performance. The performance measure we used focused on sales outcomes. Because sales outcomes are measured in the near term, a salesperson's improved sales performance may come at the expense of long-term relationship building. Research indicates some employees focus more on the outcomes of their behaviors, and ignore the means for achieving them (Flynn 2005). Under such circumstances, employees may seek shortcuts that run counter to the sustainable development of their organizations (Zhang & Jia, 2013). Egoism, a teleological approach to ethical reasoning, suggests acting consistently with one's individual or organization's self-interest is ethical, with individual consequences taking priority, regardless of the consequences to others (White & Taft, 2004). If benefits from an unethical action exceed the harm to another, an individual may rationalize the behavior as benefitting more than it harms and then justifies it (Mintz, 2013). In a study of business-to-business salespeople, Good & Schwepker (2019) found unethical intent mediated the relationship between customer-oriented selling and outcome sales performance such that customer-oriented selling negatively influences unethical intent, which positively influences sales performance. This is similar to our findings in that customer-directed deviance (a form of unethical behavior) fully mediates the relationship between customer-oriented selling and sales performance in the same fashion. These findings lend credence to those in agency theory that finds agents do not consistently behave in the best interest of principals (Bosse & Phillips, 2016).

Since customer relationships equate to repeat sales over the long-term and we found customer-relationship-building competence likewise is positively related to sales performance (H8), it behooves the salesperson to focus on building long-term relationships as a means for improving sales performance. Such outcome improvements are likely to be more enduring than achieving sales outcomes through deviant behaviors, which negatively impact relationship building.

Managerially, the overall model provides insight into the role of political skill in influencing business-to-business salespeople's customer-relationship-building competence and sales performance. Salespeople should be taught political skills including social astuteness, interpersonal influence networking ability, and sincerity. Being socially astute involves salespeople learning to observe others, interpret interactions between and with other people, and adjusting their behaviors to meet various circumstances (Ferris et al., 2007). To improve salespeople's networking ability, they must be taught how to identify and develop relationships with crucial, resource-heavy contacts within their

organization so that they can utilize these resources to their advantage. In addition, they must be trained on how to access and utilize organizational information. Improving salespeople's conflict management and negotiation skills will enhance their ability to network (McAllister et al., 2018). Finally, apparent sincerity can be fostered by educating salespeople in perception management. When interacting with others, salespeople need to say and do things that make them appear authentic, genuine, and forthright. They must be honest in their dealings with others and avoid any coercive or manipulative actions. Training salespeople in ethics via reviewing company codes of ethics or using scenarios to train salespeople how to handle ethical situations may help in this regard. This is particularly critical given the finding in this research that while customer-relationship-building competence improves sales performance, certain customer-directed deviance may likewise improve sales performance. While customer-directed deviant behaviors may result in improved performance outcomes, these are likely to be temporary as opposed to the long-term performance gains anticipated from relationship building. Although deceived customers may be tricked into buying once, long-term these behaviors lead to deterioration of trust and dissolved relationships.

## 6. Limitations and directions for future research

Like most models, the model examined in this study is constrained by the variables chosen and as such it offers a limited view of the antecedents and consequences of any of its constructs. Considering this study examined political skill as it relates to outcome sales performance, future research may wish to examine salesperson political skill as it relates to behavioral sales performance. Given customer-directed deviance focuses on a specific type of unethical behavior directed at customers, it might be interesting to examine the relationship between political skill and moral judgment. While we find politically skilled salespeople are better at building relationships, do they also possess another key salesperson skill, the ability to empathize? What is the relationship between business-to-business salespeople's political skill and their job satisfaction or job stress?

This study used a self-report measure of performance. Perhaps future studies could examine an objectively based measure of salesperson performance. Nevertheless, there is considerable empirical evidence to support the use of self-report measures of performance (Churchill et al., 1985; Schneider et al., 1996). Moreover, this study's constructs were assessed from the salesperson's perspective. Given the content matter is the political skill of business-to-business salespeople, we believe single contact with the salespeople is appropriate. However, examining the perspective from the sales supervisor, customers or a dual perspective from the buyer and seller would be valuable. Sales managers or independent staff may contact customers to collect status information regarding sales relationships that may not be shared with/recognized by the salesperson. Due to the cross-sectional nature of this sample, the study's model only captures a snapshot of the proposed antecedents and consequences. It might be constructive to examine these constructs in a longitudinal study.

Survey research is subject to concern with the honesty of survey respondents, especially regarding deviant behaviors. To mitigate this concern, respondents were offered anonymity (Randall & Fernandes, 1991). There is little reason to believe respondents had any incentive to respond untruthfully considering they completed the survey online with no possibility of either their employer, the researcher, or anyone else being able to identify them.

The surprising and unexpected finding that customer-directed deviance is significant but positively related to sales performance (H9) may reflect customer-directed deviance has a yet unexplored role in business-to-business sales organizations. For example, are there occasions when business-to-business salespeople believe they have such a close relationship with the customer they can act "on behalf" of the buyer, even when being deviant? Similar to parents using deception with their

children for their "benefit" (e.g., Roberts, 2014), and consistent with the idea that sales deviance does not have to conflict with client interests (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006a), do business-to-business relationships become so close that sellers will act deviantly because they believe it to be in the clients' best interest? Also, under what circumstances are salespeople willing to commit deviant behaviors in a relational-oriented environment? Understanding levels of customer closeness and perceptions of what this means may provide valuable business-to-business insight for future research.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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