Conflict Management Strategies And Manifest Conflict: Do They Matter In Buyer/Seller Relationships?

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the gap in research concerning conflict and conflict management in buyer/seller relationships. Two types of manifest conflict, functional and dysfunctional, were tested to determine the distinct effect of each on the buyer/seller relationship and to determine if the two types of conflict are determined in some way by the choice of one of five management strategies available to the seller.

INTRODUCTION

*S*ince the goal of any salesperson should be to improve the quality of the relationship with the buyer, it is important to determine if the two types of manifest conflict, functional and dysfunctional, each have a distinct effect on the buyer/seller relationship and if the two types of conflict are determined in some way by the choice of one of five management strategies available to the seller. The objective of this research is to develop and test a conceptual model of conflict in buyer/seller relationships and to examine the relationships between conflict resolution strategies and manifest conflict, as well as those between manifest conflict and the quality of relationships in the buyer/seller environment.

This research, then, seeks to answer the following questions: (1) Is the conflict management strategy chosen by a salesperson associated with the levels of functional and dysfunctional conflict that are manifested in a conflict incident? (2) Do the levels of the types of conflict manifested in a conflict incident have a correlation with the quality of relationship between a salesperson and a buyer/client?

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Manifest Conflict Defined

The broad definition of conflict is a disagreement. Early marketing theorists used the term to depict the antecedent conditions of conflicted behavior, the actual affective states of conflict, the cognitive states of individuals, and conflicted behavior (Pondy 1967). Conflict was also defined as a "breakdown in the decision-making apparatus resulting in difficulty in selecting alternative courses of action" (Assael 1969 pp. 573-74).

Conflict, by connotation, elicits negative emotions. However, conflict can be viewed as negative or positive. Negative conflict, also termed affective, dysfunctional, or A-type conflict (Amason, et al. 1995), is destructive to the relationship of the conflicting parties. Positive conflict, also called functional, cognitive or C-type conflict (Amason et al. 1995), promotes understanding and leads to achieved goals. As an analogy, consider the outcomes of different types of rain storms that occur in nature. A slow, soaking rain may nurture plants and replenish water supplies. A deluge or flood accompanied by violent wind or hail may leave crops damaged or whole cities destroyed. It stands to reason then, that manifest conflict can also occur differently, leaving both positive and negative aftermaths.

A more recent model of conflict hypothesizes that there are three types of conflict (De Dreu and Weingart 2003; Jehn and Mannix 2001). Task conflict occurs when there are opposing views about how a particular job should be completed (De Dreu and Weingart 2003). Process conflict "pertains to issues of duty and resource delegation, such as who should do what and how much responsibility different people should get" (Jehn and Mannix 2001, p. 239). Relationship conflict arises when there are personality differences that lead to disharmony that is personal and destructive to the relationship (De Dreu and Weingart 2003). However, this model has been tested only in a team environment, which is not appropriate for this study.

One conceptual view of functional and dysfunctional conflict is a continuum of conflict that is centered upon an imaginary line (Rosenberg and Stern 1970, 1971). This continuum represents the level or amount of conflict that exists in a relationship. Any level of conflict below the line results in favorable outcomes and is therefore considered functional. Greater amounts or levels of conflict that fall above the imaginary line result in destructive outcomes and are therefore considered dysfunctional. Robicheaux and El-Ansary (1975-76) also viewed conflict as occurring along a continuum. Functional conflict occurs simultaneously with cooperative behavior, while dysfunctional conflict and non-cooperative behavior would happen together in the worst situation.

A more recent view of manifest conflict considers functional and dysfunctional conflict as separate constructs, which means that one or both types could occur in a conflict incident. The determination of which type occurs is based on the outcomes of the conflict incident. When the relationship deteriorates and disintegrates as a result of conflict, dysfunctional conflict has occurred. When the relationship improves after a conflict incident, functional conflict has occurred.

This concept of conflict was tested in a study of intrafirm conflict (Menon, Bhadarwaj, and Howell 1996). Dysfunctional conflict and functional conflict were tested as individual constructs, with separate antecedents and consequences. The findings supported the existence of the two types of conflict and indicated that the two types are negatively correlated.

Amason (1996) hypothesized that dysfunctional and functional conflict are separate constructs. Unlike the results of Menon, Bharadwaj, and Howell's (1996) study, however, the results of this study indicated that the while the two constructs are correlated, they are not always negatively correlated. There are times when high levels of both functional and dysfunctional conflict exist. An example of this phenomenon would be a conflict incident that resulted in an excellent decision being made, but the process of reaching that decision was so stressful that the lingering emotions are negative.

Plank and Francis (2001) also found that there are two distinct types of conflict, and tried to determine a causal order between the two. The rationale is that high levels of functional conflict would eventually lead to dysfunctional conflict, but no evidence was found to support that hypothesis.

Since manifest conflict, by definition, is seen as the outward behaviors between the two parties, it stands to reason that some thoughts or actions preceded these behaviors. In Pondy's (1967) model, resolution strategies modified the manifest conflict stage. Additionally, Schul, Pride, and Little (1983) stated "…channel members who experience intrachannel conflict initially enter a cognitive or affective stage of conflict before exhibiting any conflict related behavior. It is in this early stage that the channel member's feelings of stress, tension, and animosity form toward the offending party (p. 23)."

Conflict Management Styles Defined

If functional conflict is so important in improving/maintaining relationship quality, what are the determinants of it? How should conflictful situations be managed to ensure the outcome is positive? Thomas (1976) proposed five methods of managing conflict.

- Integrating
- Compromising
- Avoiding
- Obliging
- Dominating

Integrating conflict resolution strategies involve high concern for self and high concern for other. Based on the ideals of Mary Parker Follett, integration encompasses the best solution for all parties involved (Rahim and Magner 1995). In today's language, it results in a win-win situation.

The c*ompromising* style of conflict management involves moderate concern for self as well as for the other party involved in the conflict incident. It refers to a give-and-take method of resolving the problem, with neither party getting exactly what he/she wants, but both getting some of what they want (Rahim and Magner 1995).

The *avoiding* style of conflict management involves low concern for self and low concern for other. It occurs when the parties in the conflict choose to ignore the conflict. This can happen as a deliberate withdrawal from the negotiations with the intent to confound the resolution process (Deutsch 1972), to refuse to accept any responsibility for the situation (Rahim and Magner 1995), or just to avoid the tension and unpleasantness of the situation.

The *obliging* style of conflict management styles involves low concern for self and high concern for the others involved in the conflict (Rahim and Magner 1995). One of the conflicting parties suppresses their own desires and goals in order to satisfy those of the other party.

The *dominating* style of conflict management style involves high concern for self and low concern for others (Rahim and Magner 1983). This strategy has also been termed aggression (Deutsch 1973) and threats (Stern 1971). It involves one higher-powered individual or firm choosing a solution and forcing the other party to accept it.

Quality Of Relationship Defined

In the buyer/seller arena, the quality of the relationship has been measured using many of the same constructs as in the channels literature. Some of these include trust and satisfaction (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Boles, Johnson, and Barksdale 2000), age of the relationship and increasing or decreasing importance of the relationship (Steinman, Deshpande, and Farley 2000), and frequency of contact with salesperson, extent of social interaction with salesperson, and trust of the salesperson (Doney and Cannon 1997). Narayandas and Rangan (2004) found that trust in buyer/seller relationships led to long-term relationships, regardless of asymmetry in power structures. This was attributed to the interorganizational commitment that was a product of the higher trust levels.

Trust and satisfaction have been used both as separate constructs and combined to measure relationship quality in interorganizational studies and buyer/seller studies more than any other constructs. The two constructs together combine an emotional state that represents historical, present, and anticipated interactions between the buyer and the seller and, therefore, represents relationship quality.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

For added ease in understanding the conflict management styles presented below, the original party responding within the conflict incident will be referred to as the seller, with the party reacting to the first response being referred to as the buyer. This is not meant to insinuate in any way that this is always the case but illustrates what seems most likely to happen.

Integrating Management Strategy and Manifest Conflict. As the conflict incident becomes active, each party must conceptualize the conditions that exist (Thomas 1976) and decide what behavior seems appropriate. One of the behaviors that can be chosen is the integrating strategy of conflict management, which is defined as that behavior which exhibits high concern for self and high concern for others (Rahim 1983, Rahim and Magner 1995). The term

integration is based on the work of Mary Parker Follett (Rahim and Magner 1995) which states that there is a possible resolution to conflict that finds an ultimate solution for both parties. True integration leads to an outcome in which neither party gives up anything, and both gain from the interaction.

In a buyer/seller environment, the nature of the sales process, as well as the other stimuli mentioned above, can quickly and easily lead to active conflict. However, if the seller desires for the incident to be concluded in such a way that both parties are satisfied with the outcome, he or she may look for and offer suggestions or recommendations that would lead to that outcome. Integrative-like behaviors have been proposed to reduce role conflict, increase profit, increase satisfaction (Dabholkar, Johnston, and Cathey 1994), decrease misperceptions, and improve communication (Thomas 1976).

Thus, as the integrative style is utilized and reciprocated, communication should become more open, and it is likely those innovative solutions will be discovered. This constructive interaction should cause the buyer and seller to have a positive perception of the outcome of the conflict incident.

Based on the above, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1a: An *integrating* conflict management strategy is positively associated with functional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

H1b: An *integrating* conflict management strategy is negatively associated with dysfunctional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

Compromising Management Strategy And Manifest Conflict

The compromising conflict management style is one in which concessions are made by both parties (Rahim and Magner 1996, Thomas 1976, Weitz and Bradford 1999). Each of the parties gains some part of what he or she considers the best possible outcome, while giving up another part of that possible outcome. Referred to as "horse-trading" or "splitting the difference" (Thomas 1976), this style does not allow for an "enlarged pie," as does the *integrating* style, nor does it mean that either party will necessarily have a larger or smaller piece of the pie. What may actually happen is that the size of the pie piece stays the same, but its composition may change. Both the buyer and the seller should eventually gain something of value, while giving up some other element that may have been of equal or lesser value. Because of these gains, both parties should exit the conflict incident having a positive perception of the outcome. Therefore,

H2a: A *compromising* management strategy is positively associated with functional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

H2b: A *compromising* management strategy is negatively associated with dysfunctional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

Avoiding Management Strategy And Manifest Conflict

The avoiding management style is one in which a party exhibits no concern for either one self or the other party (Rahim and Magner 1995). An individual may avoid conflict instinctively or deliberately. The instinctive withdrawal may come because an individual has an aversion to confrontation. The deliberate withdrawal may be an effort to maintain the relationship by avoiding conflict, or it may be a quiet rebellion demonstrated by a refusal to communicate with the relationship partner.

When relationship partners feel that they are powerless to change anything in the relationship, frustration often builds (Deutsch 1973). Avoiding behavior usually stems from this frustration, an emotion that is unlikely to disappear. As the conditions surrounding the conflict incident continue or intensify, the frustration grows and eventually erupts, often in an emotional outburst. This outburst would not seem conducive to positive outcomes

associated with functional conflict but is instead more likely to lead to dysfunctional conflict. Therefore, the following hypotheses are offered:

H3a: An *avoiding* conflict management strategy is negatively associated with functional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

H3b: An *avoiding* conflict management strategy is positively associated with dysfunctional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

Obliging Management Strategy And Manifest Conflict

The obliging conflict management strategy occurs when one party has little concern for their own interests but high concern for the other party's interests (Rahim and Magner 1995). Termed the accommodative or appeasement style by Thomas (1976), this style may be used when the obliging party desires the continuation of the relationship above all else (Thomas 1976). A conflict incident in which the obliging strategy is used is a win/lose situation, with the understanding that one party has the "I let you win because I need you" attitude. Using the pie analogy, one person's pie piece gets smaller, and the other party's piece gets larger.

When a conflict incident arises, a seller may realize that, if he or she does not concede on all of the issues a buyer has, the buyer may take his or her valuable order elsewhere. If the buyer is a key account because of large volume or because the firm the buyer represents is an industry leader, the seller may make continual concessions to the buyer. This could cause the seller to resent the buyer's attitude, as well as resent that his or her earnings may be reduced because price cuts have eaten into his or her commissions. Also, the seller may receive pressure from his or her firm to satisfy the customer yet keep the price at the listed price. As the buyer receives the concession from the seller, he or she may remember past reductions the salesperson has made or compare the current concession with offers from other salespeople. The buyer may push for even larger concessions. This could cause additional stress on the salesperson and resentment from the buyer when the concessions are not made. As the conflict incident concludes, communication may be strained, and both parties may be wishing for other outcomes.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are offered:

H4a: An *obliging* conflict management strategy is negatively associated with functional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

H4b: An *obliging* conflict management strategy is positively associated with dysfunctional conflict in a buyer/seller environment.

Dominating Management Strategy And Manifest Conflict

The dominating conflict management strategy is one in which one party attempts to force his wishes or will on the other party in the conflict incident (Weitz and Bradford 1999). The party using the dominating strategy has a low concern for others and a high concern for self (Rahim and Magner 1995). Deutsch (1973) identified the competitive relationship process as a "situation when a participant behaves in such a way as to increase his own chances of goal attainment, (and) he decreases the changes of the others (p. 22)." The individual using the dominating strategy demonstrates a suspicious and hostile attitude, as well as a win/lose perspective.

A dominating strategy may emerge if a seller enters a conflict incident with a need to satisfy his or her ego, with anger over a previous conflict incident or over something totally unrelated to the current situation, or with pressure from his or her manager to resolve this situation in a given way. The communication used by the seller may be abrupt or rude, or the salesperson may even resort to lying to the buyer to ensure that the conflict is settled in the seller's best interest. If the buyer perceives the communication as negative, he or she could respond first with reason, then dissolve into angry terms in reciprocation to the seller. As it becomes obvious that the conflict issues will not be

resolved, previously latent conflict issues may erupt into active conflict. Personal feelings and accusations may soon be involved (Thomas 1976). Therefore the following hypotheses are offered:

H5a: A *dominating* conflict management strategy is negatively associated with functional conflict.

H5b: A *dominating* conflict management strategy is positively associated with dysfunctional conflict.

Support For The Association Of Manifest Conflict With Relationship Quality

Early theorists proposed that manifest conflict had effects on the quality of relationships. Mallen (1963) proposed that the type of relationship that existed would lead to a certain level of conflict; however, he did recognize that there was an association between the two. Pondy (1967) stated that manifest conflict led to another stage, conflict aftermath.

Each conflict episode is but one of a sequence of such episodes that constitute the relationships among organization participants. If the conflict is genuinely resolved to the satisfaction of all participants, the basis for a more cooperative relationship may be laid…On the other hand, if the conflict is merely suppressed but not resolved, the latent conditions of conflict may be aggravated and explode in more serious form until they are rectified or until the relationship dissolves (p. 305).

When dysfunctional conflict is manifested in a buyer seller relationship, it is characterized by damaging statements, disparaging remarks, and criticism. Either party may question the other's commitment to the relationship (Anderson and Weitz 1992). Both parties may experience frustration, anger, and/or a desire to circumvent other such incidents. The relationship may deteriorate (van de Ven and Walker 1984) or even to expire (Day 1995). Therefore the following hypotheses are offered.

H6:   Functional conflict will have a positive association with relationship quality in a buyer/seller environment.

H7:   Dysfunctional conflict will have a negative association with relationship quality in a buyer/seller environment.

METHODOLOGY

To study the research questions posed in this study, three separate scales were chosen to measure the constructs of the proposed model. Each scale replicates one of the prior studies related to conflict management. To measure conflict management strategies, Rahim (1983) developed a scale of 28 items to measure the five conflict management strategies that are based on Thomas' (1976) work, which explained 89.3 percent of the variance in all five styles. To measure functional and dysfunctional conflict, Jehn (1992) developed a scale in which four items attempt to measure dysfunctional conflict and reflect the understanding that dysfunctional conflict becomes personal and negative very quickly and three items attempt to measure functional conflict and indicate the awareness that functional conflict involves disagreement about the conflict issue and remains impersonal. Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990) developed a scale to specifically measure relationship quality in a buyer/seller environment through items measuring levels of satisfaction and trust.

Based on the above, a questionnaire was developed to survey the sample selected for this study. Twenty-eight items from the Rahim scale, seven items from the Jehn scale, and eleven items fro the Crosby, et al scale were included. A copy of the survey instrument is included in appendix A.

The Sample

The unit of analysis for this study was purchasing managers who interact with industrial salespeople. The business-to-business sales setting was chosen because much of the literature on conflict and relationships has its origins in channels of distribution studies and interorganizational research.

The sample frame was provided by the Institute for Supply Management (Formerly the National Association for Purchasing Managers) and was chosen from members who work in industries that are categorized by SIC codes 20-39 (all manufacturing), 50-51 (wholesale trade of both durable and non-durable goods), 53-54 (general merchandise and food stores), and 56-57 (apparel and accessory stores; furniture and home furnishings firms). The sample also was chosen to include respondents whose primary responsibilities were interacting with salespeople and purchasing. Since the respondents were questioned regarding a particular conflict incident, it was imperative that each one have regular contact with salespeople, and the individuals included in the sample should have that interaction.

Method of Analysis

This study seeks to examine the relationship between the independent variables and one dependent variable at a time. A statistical technique that fits the testing of the proposed hypotheses is multiple regression analysis. There will be four separate regression models.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

During December 2003, survey instruments were mailed to 1,950 purchasing managers selected for the study. Following two mailings, 273 valid responses were received, yielding a response rate of fourteen percent. Data were analyzed and the results are summarized below. Of the 273 valid responses, 39.6% of the respondents reported having the title purchasing agent, purchasing manager, purchasing administrator, purchasing director, or purchasing supervisor. Nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents reported a title of buyer, senior buyer, and corporate buyer, while 8.4% had titles of materials manager or analyst, or materials control manager or director. Slightly over six percent (6.3%) had titles of procurement agent, procurement manager or planner, or procurement specialist. The remaining titles varied from president to agronomist to cost reduction team leader.

The industries reported by the respondents varied, with 11.4% answering they worked in the "electronic and other electrical equipment except computers" category, 9.5% in the "chemicals and allied products" industry, 8.8% in "fabricated metal products" category, and 8.4% in the "food and kindred products" category. Fewer than six percent of the respondents were employed in any other single category.

The responses received were mailed from 44 different states, with Ohio having the greatest number of respondents, with 19 (7.0%). Seventy-four percent (74.0%) of them were male and 26% were female. The overwhelming majority were white (92.3%), with 3.3% African-Americans, 1.1% Hispanic, 1.5% reported "other" ethnicity, with 1.8% leaving the category blank. Seventy-four percent (74%) have an education level of bachelor's degree or higher.

Functional And Dysfunctional Conflict

The first five hypotheses of the proposed model predicted the effect of conflict management strategies on manifest conflict. As stated, H1(a) and H2(a) proposed a positive relationship between the integrating strategy and functional conflict and between the compromising strategy and functional conflict. As shown in Table 1, the direction of the integrating strategy with functional conflict was positive as predicted, but these findings were not significant. The direction of the compromising strategy with functional conflict was negative, which was not as predicted, but was not significant. Thus H1(a) and H2(a) are not supported.

As stated, H1(b) and H2(b) proposed negative relationships between the integrating and compromising strategies and dysfunctional conflict. As shown in Table 2, the direction of integrating strategy with dysfunctional conflict was negative, as predicted, but these findings were not significant. The direction of compromising strategy with dysfunctional conflict was also negative, as predicted, but these findings were not significant, and neither H1(b) and H2(b) are supported.

Table 1: Results of Regression Analysis for Functional Conflict and Conflict Management Strategies

	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient (beta)
Constant	2.229*	-
Integrating	9.606	.067
Obliging	-1.562	-.012
Avoiding	3.626	.035
Dominating	.315	.312*
Compromising	-8.926	-.081
F Change	-	6.775*
R^2	-	.113
Adjusted R^2	-	.096

*$p<.01$ **$p<.05$,   ***$p<.1$

Given the constructive nature of the integrating conflict management strategy, buyers might not perceive what occurs in the interaction between buyer and seller as conflict at all. It might be perceived as only positive communication. This would explain the direction in both H1(a) and H1(b) being correct, but insignificant. In a study considering the marketing channel relationships in the specialty tools and fasteners industry, Payan and McFarland (2005) found that only the influence strategy rationality – which has a definition nearly identical to that of integration – was likely to produce channel member compliance.

Similarly, in the Payan and McFarland (2005) study, the influence strategy recommendations was not as likely to produce compliance. Although recommendations and the compromising conflict management strategy are not identical, they are similar in that a party in a discussion is being asked to do something he/she does not wish to do. Even if the other party in the discussion is willing to give and take, it would seem logical that one or both parties would perceive the discussion as negative communication. This perception would explain the unexpected direction of the relationship between the compromising strategy and functional conflict, as well as the expected direction between the compromising strategy and dysfunctional conflict, even though both were statistically insignificant associations.

Table 2: Results of Regression Analysis for Dysfunctional Conflict and Conflict Management Strategies

	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient (beta)
Constant	2.237*	-
Integrating	-6.713	-.045
Obliging	-3.243	-.025
Avoiding	2.801	.026
Dominating	.203	.193*
Compromising	-4.225	-.004
F Change	-	2.011***
R^2	-	.036
Adjusted R^2	-	.018

*$p<.01$ **$p<.05$ ***$p<.1$

As stated, hypotheses 3(a) and 4(a) proposed negative relationships between the avoiding and obliging strategies and functional conflict. As shown in Table 1, the direction of the avoiding strategy with functional conflict was positive, which is not as predicted. The direction of the obliging strategy with functional conflict was negative, as predicted, but these findings were not significant. Therefore, H3(a) and H4(a) are not supported.

As shown in Table 2, the direction of both the avoiding *s*trategy with dysfunctional conflict and the obliging strategy with dysfunctional conflict were positive, as predicted. Since neither of these findings were significant, neither H3(b) nor H4(b) are supported.   In a study of conflict within teams, Dixon, Gassenheimer, and Barr (2003) proposed that individuals can exhibit "non-voice behaviors" for different reasons in a conflict situation. Some

individuals remain quiet in response to a conflict situation out of loyalty to the team. If this occurs, the overriding concern for the other individuals of the team may lead to the team being effective in spite of the conflict. Other individuals may choose to avoid the conflict or oblige others on their team because of a lack of concern. This "I don't care" attitude may allow others on the team who are more conscientious to deal with the conflict and make good decisions for the team. However, some individuals may choose to avoid conflict out of intentional neglect, thinking to cause harm to the team out of spite. This passive-aggressive behavior may or may not lead to dysfunctional conflict, depending on the general make-up of the team's membership. None of these factors were considered in this study and may have contributed to the unexpected direction of the avoidance/functional conflict relationship. The lack of significance in the relationships may also be contributed to the how differently individuals perceive avoidance and obliging, based on their own personalities.

In terms of functional and dysfunctional conflict, the study's only significant findings relate to the dominating management strategy. As stated, hypothesis 5(a) proposed a negative relationship between the dominating strategy and functional conflict; while hypothesis 5(b) proposed a positive relationship between the dominating strategy and dysfunctional conflict. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the direction of the dominating strategy with functional conflict was positive, which was not as predicted. These findings were significant at the p<.01 level. The direction of the dominating strategy with dysfunctional conflict was also positive, as predicted and significant at the p<.01 level. Therefore, the study does not support H5(a) and but does support H5(b).

Manifest Conflict And Trust

The sixth and seventh hypotheses proposed an association between manifest conflict and relationship quality in the buyer/seller environment. Trust and satisfaction were the constructs chosen to measure relationship quality. In the proposed model, functional conflict was projected to have a positive association with relationship quality.   As indicated in Table 3, the results indicate the associations of functional conflict with both trust and satisfaction were negative, but these associations were not significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 6 is not supported.

The F statistic for the regression model of manifest conflict with trust was 11.273 and the change in the F value when manifest conflict was added to the model was 20.668; both were significant at the *p*<.001 level. It can be induced, therefore, that the presence of manifest conflict can be useful in predicting trust in a buyer/seller environment.

Table 3: Results of Regression Analysis for Relationship Quality/Trust with Manifest Conflict

	Unstandardized Coefficient	**Standardized Coefficient (beta)**
Constant	4.689	-
Conflict Management Strategies	-	-
Integrating	0.273	.199**
Obliging	4.750	.039
Avoiding	-0.139	-.140**
Dominating	-0.105	-.108***
Compromising	9.178	.086***
Main Effects	-	-
Dysfunctional Conflict	-0.298	-.323*
Functional Conflict	-5.763	-.060
Model Summary	-	-
F Model	-	11.273
F Change	-	20.668*
R^2	-	.093
Adjusted R^2	-	.293

Dysfunctional conflict was projected to have a negative association with relationship quality in the proposed model. As shown in Table 4, there was, in fact, a negative association of dysfunctional conflict with both trust and satisfaction, and all associations were significant at the $p<.01$ level. Thus, Hypothesis 7 is supported. There is a significant, negative association between dysfunctional conflict and trust.

Table 4: Results of Regression Analysis for Relationship Quality/Satisfaction with Manifest Conflict

	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient (beta)
Constant	4.011*	-
Conflict Management Strategies	-	-
Integrating	.370	.256*
Obliging	.126	.099***
Avoiding	-9.076	-.087
Dominating	-.1	-.098***
Compromising	.3818	.034
Main Effects	-	-
Dysfunctional Conflict	-.344	-.354*
Functional Conflict	-4.488	-.044
Model Summary	-	-
F Model	-	12.620*
F Change	-	23.988*
R^2	-	.250
Adjusted R^2	-	.230

The F statistic was 12.620 and the change in the F value when manifest conflict was added to the model was 23.988; both were significant at the $p<.001$ level. It can be induced, therefore, that the presence of manifest conflict can be useful in predicting satisfaction in a buyer/seller environment

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study are relevant to marketing practitioners and managers, particularly salespeople, sales managers, and purchasing managers. First, the most straightforward and obvious finding is that dysfunctional conflict is detrimental to relationship quality. As indicated above, there was significant support for the proposal that dysfunctional conflict has a negative effect on relationship quality. Conversely, functional conflict showed no significant association with either trust or satisfaction. Even though the coefficients of functional conflict were not significant, they were relatively small and were negative in direction (-.060 with trust and -.044 with satisfaction). This might be attributed to the possible negative perception of even functional conflict. Another possible explanation for this might be one that would be comparable to a measuring customer satisfaction, which is done by measuring the difference between expectation and experience. Functional conflict may be considered an expected behavior from salespeople and the experiencing it would have little effect on relationship quality, similar to the hygiene factors. Dysfunctional conflict, however, would be an experience that would fall below expectation and therefore lead to a deterioration of relationship quality.

Given this fact, senior managers and sales managers need to understand that there are two separate but important factors that contribute to conflict between buyers and sellers. These two factors, organizational structure and individual salesperson training, will be discussed below.

The first factor that affects conflict in a buyer/seller relationship is the underlying structure of the sales organization. These circumstances are assumed to be somewhat fixed or slow to change (Thomas 1976). The two types of conditions can be classified as structural and attitudinal in nature.

The *Structural antecedents* is the term chosen to describe all relationship, organizational, and interorganizational structural conditions that may contribute to some level of conflict. One structural cause of conflict is goal divergence. Parties in a buyer/seller relationship, as well as those in an intraorganizational or interorganizational relationship, will almost certainly have some differences in the goals they choose to pursue. These differing goals are often used as criteria for decisions (Rosenberg and Stern 1970, 1971), and those decisions can adversely affect the achievement of another party's goals, thus increasing the chance of conflict (Frazier 1983). Rosenberg and Stern (1971) found that goal incompatibility was a cause of conflict between the manufacturers and distributors of a household durable good. Given this understanding, senior managers should strive to structure their organizations according to the marketing concept. Keeping in mind that all organizations must meet their goals – both profit and others - these managers must design systems within the organization that encourage and reward a customer orientation. This is not necessarily the old "the customer is always right" attitude, but an attitude of seeking what is best for each customer and educating the customer regarding the best course of action.

Some of the most highly examined structural antecedents of conflict are the theories of power, sources of power or influence strategies, and balance of power. While many studies have tested these theories, the most recent studies (Kim 2000 and Narayandas and Rangan 2004) have shown that appropriate communication and personal trust can sustain and grow relationships in buyer/seller relationships with even the most unbalanced power structure. While it is not recommend that managers ignore power structures, it is recommended that long-term relationships between buyers and sellers be allowed to develop.

Attitudinal antecedents is the term used to describe the attitudes, predispositions, outlooks, and reactions of the individuals and organizations involved in a relationship in which there is conflict. Attitudinal antecedents are the second type of organizational antecedents to conflict. One attitudinal source of conflict has to do with the roles played by the relationship members, including organizations or firms involved in an alliance. A role is a set of expected behaviors each member should exhibit (Etgar 1979). Conflict may occur when conduct or activities transpire that are incongruent with the role expectations (Rosenberg and Stern 1970 and 1971, Etgar 1979), when the relationship participants are not certain of their roles (Etgar 1979), or when one or more participants are not satisfied with their roles (Frazier 1983). In order to minimize this organizational source of conflict, managers should define very clearly the roles, job descriptions, and activities of its salespeople. These definitions should flow from the mission and culture of the organization and should be supported from top management down. When a salesperson knows what his organization's expectations are, he or she is free to make appropriate decisions when dealing with customers and have those decisions honored by his organization. This removes another potential cause of dysfunctional conflict, which is a salesperson or organization going back on its word to a customer.

Other attitudinal antecedents that contribute to conflict include the incentive structure, policies, and procedures that govern the behavior of each salesperson (Thomas 1976). While these antecedents may seem more structural than attitudinal, they communicate the attitude of the organization to the salesperson. A commission only pay structure may communicate that the firm values the closed sale above customer satisfaction. A prohibitive return policy may communicate a lack of concern for the customer's welfare. Managers should be certain that the incentive structure, policies, and procedures all communicate the same message, and that the message is the one that it should be.

The second factor that contributes to conflict in a buyer/seller environment is the actions of the individual salespeople and their customers. The only conflict management strategy that had a significant association with both functional and dysfunctional conflict in this study was the *dominating* strategy. Further research may be warranted to understand why most of the proposed associations between conflict management strategies and manifest conflict were not supported. There are several possible rationales, which managers should consider when interpreting the results of this study. The first rationale might be that conflict management strategies are not, as proposed, antecedents of manifest conflict. Instead, conflict management strategies may be symptoms of functional or dysfunctional conflict, or evidence of communication styles, which are chosen within the stage of manifest conflict to exhibit the perceptions of the parties in the incident.

Another rationale may be that managers have a negative perception of conflict in general. While functional conflict and dysfunctional conflict were operationalized as two separate constructs, and factor analysis indicated that they were perceived as such, managers might view even the "disagreements over content" that characterizes functional conflict as a negative event. This would explain the positive association between dominating and functional conflict. If this were true, it would also seem that the positive communication styles of integrating and compromising might not necessarily be perceived as being associated with even functional conflict. Given these rationales, managers should strive to recruit salespeople who have a cooperative attitude and train salespeople in collaborative communication skills. While these recommendations are not new advice, they continue to be relevant in today's sales organization.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several areas of future research that could be conducted using the current data set. First, an identical instrument could be administered to a sample of professional industrial salespeople. This change might give some indication of the differences in buyers' and sellers' perceptions of conflict management strategies and their effects on relationship quality.

Another relevant addition to the understanding in the buyer/seller arena might include the effect of sales teams instead of individual salespeople on manifest conflict and relationship quality. Weitz and Bradford (1999) stated that one of the major functions of a salesperson in the partnering era was to serve as a member of a sales team.

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Appendix A
Survey Questions and Scales

MEASURING MANIFEST CONFLICT (JEHN 1992)

Use a 1 to 7 scale with 1 anchoring "none", 4 being "a little", and 7 anchoring "a great deal"

Affective conflict (dysfunctional):

* How much anger was there between you and the salesperson during the course of the negotiation?
* How much personal friction was there between you and the salesperson during the course of the negotiation?
* How much of a personality clash was there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?
* How much tension was there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?

Cognitive conflict (functional):

* How many disagreements over different ideas were there between you and the salesperson during the negotiation?
* How many differences about the content of the decision were there between you and the salesperson during the negotiation?
* How many general differences of opinion were there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?

MEASURING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE (RAHIM 1983)

Use a 1 to 7 scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree."

* I try to investigate an issue with my client to find a solution acceptable to us.
* I try to integrate my ideas with those of my client to come up with a decision jointly.
* I try to work with my client to find solutions to a problem which satisfy our expectations.
* I exchange accurate information with my client to solve a problem together
* I try to bring all our concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way.
* I collaborate with my client to come up with decisions acceptable to us.
* I try to work with my client for a proper understanding of a problem.
* I attempt to avoid being "put on the spot" and try to keep my conflict with my client to myself.
* I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with my client.
* I try to stay away from disagreement with my client.
* I void an encounter with my client.
* I try to keep my disagreements with my client to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.
* I try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with my client.
* I use my influence to get my ideas accepted.
* I use my authority to make a decision in my favor.
* I argue my case with my client to show the merits of my position.
* I use my expertise to make a decision in my favor.

- I sometimes use my power to win a competitive situation.
- I am generally firm in pursuing my side of the issue.
- I generally try to satisfy the needs of my client.
- I usually accommodate the wishes of my client.
- I give in to the wishes of my client.
- I usually allow concessions to my client.
- I often go along with the suggestions of my client
- I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse.
- I usually propose a middle ground for breaking deadlocks.
- I negotiate with my client so that a compromise can be reached.
- I use "give and take" so that a compromise can be made.

MEASURING QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP – TRUST COMPONENT (CROSBY, EVANS, AND COWLES 1990)

Use a 1 to 7 scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree"

- My agent can be relied upon to keep his/her promises.
- There are times when I find my salesperson to be a bit insincere.
- The salesperson is trustworthy.
- My salesperson and I are in competition—he is trying to sell me a lot of products and I am trying to avoid buying them.
- My salesperson puts the customer's interest before his or her own.
- Some people, including this salesperson, are not above "bending the facts" to create the impression they want.
- This salesperson is dishonest.
- I suspect that this salesperson has sometimes withheld certain pieces of critical information that   might have affect my decision-making.

MEASURING RELATIONSHIPS QUALITY – SATISFACTION COMPONENT (CROSBY, EVANS, AND COWLES 1990)

When I think of this salesperson and my feelings with him or her I am:

- Satisfied   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Dissatisfied
- Pleased   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Displeased
- Favorable   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Unfavorable

NOTES