

CRANFIELD UNIVERSITY

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**The Key Account Manager's Internal Selling Role: An Exploration of
Interpersonal Conflict**

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PhD Thesis

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**The Key Account Manager's Internal Selling Role: An Exploration of
Interpersonal Conflict**

Supervisor: Professor Lynette Ryals

November 2008

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Acting in a boundary spanning role within their organisations, the key account manager in representing their customers' needs internally is required to manage a wide range of complex internal relationships. This can often lead to incidents of conflict between the key account manager and other individuals or groups of individuals within the organisation in non-sales functions. Using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), (Flanagan, 1954) together with an interpretive framework for data coding (Spiggle, 1994), this research investigates conflict and the key account manager's internal selling role. This research also explores how the key account manager perceives intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts and investigates the complex behavioural sequences adopted to manage them. In doing so this research addresses some of the shortcomings of the traditional view of the nature of organisational conflict and how it is managed while extending our understanding of the key account manager's internal selling role.

In contrast to the majority of research into personal selling, this research takes an interpretive approach through the analysis of transcripts from a series of CIT interviews with key account managers in the field. Twenty-nine key account managers from seven participating FMCG, Blue Chip organisations in the U.K. and U.S. participated in the research. From the CIT interviews conducted, 112 critical incidents were described with both positive and negative outcomes.

This research provides further insight into the complexity of conflict, suggesting conflict is inherent within the key account management internal selling role, that incidents of conflict do not occur in isolation, that these conflict episodes are complex, having multiple components and that a combination of behaviours can be used in their management. In addressing these issues in the key account management context, this research further develops our knowledge of personal selling and the key account manager's internal selling role by providing an analysis of the recollections of how conflict is perceived and managed by the key account managers involved.

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James Ian Forbes Speakman, Cranfield University, School of Management, November 28th 2008.

Dedicated to my entire family and in loving memory of
my mum.

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“The easiest, the most tempting, and the least creative response to conflict within an organisation is to pretend it does not exist.”

(Lyle E. Schaller, 1972)

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OUTPUTS AND DISSEMINATION OF THE RESEARCH

Academic journal papers

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

| | |
|-------|---|
| AD | Account Director |
| AE | Account Executive |
| BDM | Business Development Manager |
| BOGOF | Buy One Get One Free |
| CAQDA | Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis |
| CC | Category Controller |
| CIT | Critical Incident Technique |
| CM | Channel Manager |
| FMCG | Fast Moving Consumer Goods |
| HR | Human Resources |
| IT | Information Technology |
| KAM | Key Account Management |
| (KAMs | Used only in the Appendices refers to Other Key Account Managers) |
| NAC | National Account Controller |
| NAM | National Account Manager |
| NPD | New Product Development |
| NPD | New Product Development |
| P&L | Profit and Loss |
| R&D | Research and Development |
| SAE | Senior Account Executive |
| SCM | Senior Channel Manager |
| SNAM | Senior National Account Manager |
| WIGIG | When It's Gone It's Gone |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1 INTRODUCTION

The research reported in this thesis explores one aspect of personal selling which has not been investigated before: conflict and the key account manager's internal selling role. This inside selling role requires the key account manager to represent the customers' needs internally while negotiating for a wide variety of resources through a diverse portfolio of interpersonal interactions and social business networks, in many cases having to operate as part of a larger customer focused team (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). When working internally, key account managers are often required to resolve a wide range of interpersonal conflicts which can occur between themselves and other individuals within the sales function or other support groups as a result of their customer orientation. These conflicts have to be managed in the best interests of the key account manager's organisation while also attempting to meet the customer's needs thus maintaining the external perception of their customer orientation (Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002).

In addition to exploring the internal selling role of the key account manager, this research also highlights some of the shortcomings of the traditional view of the nature of conflict and how it is managed. The traditional view tends to treat conflicts as discrete events occurring in an otherwise cooperative environment, and the resulting management behaviours have tended to reflect the two-dimensional managerial grid (Blake and Mouton, 1970; Thomas, 1976). In contrast, this research draws on the psychology literature and investigates conflict from an alternative viewpoint, as an inherent condition of interaction within the organisation (Pondy, 1989; 1992)¹. It aims to explore the notion that conflict is a permanent feature of organisational life, that conflict episodes do not occur in isolation, that certain conflict management behaviours will only be appropriate in certain situations and that the situation may change with any

¹ First Presented at the 1986 Academy of Management meetings, Chicago, IL, August 14, 1986.

given conflict episode at any given point in time. The implications for a complex role such as selling are that, while carrying out their internal selling duties, rather than adopting a single managerial style or single combination of styles, key account managers are able to adapt and use a combination of management behaviours which can be modified throughout and across conflict episodes. Using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) this research retrospectively investigates the conflicts experienced by key account managers when dealing with other individuals or groups of individuals within their own organisation, paying particular attention to the perceived nature of any conflict encountered, the frequency and duration of the conflicts encountered, and the behaviours adopted to deal with these episodes as they occur.

1.1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1.1 Rationale: Researcher's Perspective

The origins of the researcher's interest in this topic are rooted in personal experience as a key account manager and observations made of other key account managers carrying out their day to day selling duties. The researcher's original perception was that key account managers exhibit different behaviours as they carry out their daily tasks. The researcher's interest was originally centred on the behaviours key account managers adopted in order to influence their customers during the sales interaction or selling call. However, as the research developed, a gap was identified which focused on the behaviours exhibited internally by key account managers and how they manage or influence internal relationships in order to meet their customer's needs. During a qualitative study exercise conducted as part of the research methodology course a number of interviews were carried out with key account managers. These highlighted that the key account manager has a clear understanding of conflict within the organisation, perceived as a constant barrier to achieving their goals but not always with a negative outcome. Further study of organisational conflict theories in the psychology literature identified a research opportunity which could be explored through a study of the key account manager's internal selling role. The psychology literature also provided an insight into an alternative conflict paradigm (Pondy, 1989) which considers conflict

as an inherent and ever present feature of the organisation, rather than conflict episodes occurring in discrete, isolated incidents in an otherwise cooperative organisation. This view leaves unanswered many questions regarding intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict and, with the links to behavioural strategy, provides the ideal background for an exploratory study into key account manager behaviour when handling conflict within their organisation, since the key account manager is in the unique situation of having to meet both their customers' and own organisational requirements.

1.1.2 Rationale: Organisational Conflict Literature Perspective

Current organisational conflict literature provides insight into conflict perceptions, types (task, relationship and process) (Jehn, 1995), dimensions (Jameson, 1999) and composition (Jehn and Chatman, 2000) together with styles or strategies for conflict management and resolution (Thomas, 1976; Van de Vliert, Nauta, Euwema and Janssen, 1997). Pondy (1967) is regarded as having established the generally-accepted paradigm of conflict: that conflict episodes occur as temporary disruptions to the otherwise cooperative relationships which make up the organisation. However, when reflecting on his earlier work and observing subsequent research by others, Pondy (1989) proposed that conflict is central to what an organisation is, rather than an occasional breakdown of cooperation. This is in contrast to the previous conflict paradigm suggesting that conflict is an inherent feature of organisational life. Further research into the characteristics of conflict has considered the consequences of conflict within the organisation, examining the possible positive effects of conflict addressing the questions of how and when conflict is beneficial, moving away from the generally accepted negative views regarding the consequences of conflict (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Janssen and Van de Vliert 1996, Janssen *et al.*, 1999; Jehn, 1997a). In addition to the extensive research into the nature and consequences of conflict within the organisation, there is another research stream considering how conflict is managed, the behaviours used and when these behaviours are most effective.

One stream of research has concentrated on the effectiveness of any one mode of conflict behaviour used during a conflict episode by taking a two-dimensional approach

building on Thomas' (1976) adaptation of the management grid, taking a dual concern perspective considering concern for self and concern for others (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). In contrast, another stream of research taking the complexity perspective suggests that any single conflict episode may be composed of different conflict types (Jehn and Chatman, 2000) and that the best behavioural style in dealing with any one conflict episode may vary throughout and across different conflict episodes (Euwema, Van de Vliert and Bakker, 2003; Medina, Dorado, de Cisneros and Munduate, 2004; Rahim 2002; Gross and Guerrero, 2000; Nicotera, 1993). Moreover, current research also suggests that if conflict is considered to be inherent within social networks (Pondy 1989) and commonplace within the organisation, then it is essential to fully understand these multiple complex conflict episodes and the optimal management strategies required for a productive outcome (De Dreu 1997; Euwema *et al.*, 2003; Munduate, Ganaza, Peiro and Euwema, 1999; Sheppard 1992; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). This research is providing insight into the complexity of conflict and its management, taking alternative approaches to the traditional two-dimensional dual concern theory model (Blake and Mouton, 1970; Thomas, 1976), accepting conflict as being inherent within the organisation, as having multiple components and that a combination of behaviours can be used in their management (Euwema *et al.*, 2003). This new generation of research suggests that additional research is required which considers that these complex conflict episodes may not occur in isolation and that an equally complex and continually changing set of conflict management behaviours may be required in their management (Van de Vliert, Nauta, Giebels and Janssen, 1999). Therefore the implications for organisational conflict management theory are threefold: first, the behavioural strategies adopted in the management of these conflicts will be highly complex and will be determined by a wide range of influencing factors; second, this moves theory beyond the two-dimensional dual concern perspective, in that the adaptable key account manager when dealing with these multiple, simultaneous conflicts will also need to consider the possible implications of the chosen strategy along with the changing micro environment in which they operate; and third, the conflicts experienced are constant and multiple each having a unique influence on the strategies adopted.

1.2 THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

Having outlined the research rationale from both a personal and organisational conflict literature perspective it is now important to put the research into context. First and foremost this is a piece of personal selling research which investigates one element of the selling role; i.e., the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role. Specifically, this research examines how key account managers perceive and manage incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict which arise in trying to meet both their own organisation's needs and those of the customer. Therefore the rationale needs to be put in a key account management context.

1.2.1 Context: Key Account Management

With greater competition and technological change in all markets, companies are increasingly attempting to gain a competitive advantage by forming strategic alliances and closer, longer lasting relationships with their key customers. This type of customer-centric strategic alliance is called key account management (Millman and Wilson, 1995). In order to establish these long term relationships, the supplier needs to invest in the necessary training, recruitment and development of its key account managers in order to manage the communication process across a wide variety of contacts within both customer and supplier organisations. Developing and managing these long term relationships is considered to be a key component of a key account manager's success in the modern organisation where there are many interpersonal contacts (Leigh and Marshall, 2001). Moreover, key account managers are becoming increasingly involved with complex internal networks outside of their traditional external selling roles in order to more effectively carry out their business objectives.

From the buyers' perspective this increased tendency to forge longer term relationships provides benefits in that the supplier better understands their customers' business objectives and the suppliers are therefore able to provide service solutions in line with their customers' tactical and strategic goals (Bradford, Stringfellow and Weitz, 2004). In order to continually meet these customer needs the key account manager may need to

influence internal groups such as production, logistics, marketing and finance, while undertaking a variety of tasks which may not be in line with the objectives of any one of these groups. The key account manager is very much the person in the middle, having to perform a number of activities outside of the traditional selling role. These activities or communications across a number of different groups both within their own organisation and that of the customer fall under the term 'boundary spanning' (Battencourt, Brown and MacKenzie, 2005). The boundary spanner takes up a position at the periphery of the organisation and carries out activities which relate to elements both inside and out. With the increased complexity of the key account management role, the key account manager becomes the boundary spanner between their organisation's internal environment and the external environment. In order to maintain sales performance, the key account manager needs to be able to deal manage these boundaries through effective communication and integration.

The key account manager will experience frequently conflicting objectives when carrying out the selling role and as a result is also likely to encounter an equally wide range of conflict episodes within the organisation while trying to communicate a solution across a wide range of internal barriers (Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Ryals and Bruce, 2006). These conflicts need to be effectively resolved in order to meet customer demands and maintain long term relationships. In order to manage these conflict episodes the key account manager will need to fully understand the nature of the conflicts encountered and the management strategies available to deal with these incidents as they occur. In summary, this research explores this intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role, the key account manager's perception of the conflicts encountered and how they are managed.

1.2.2 The Research Objectives

In contrast to existing research into personal selling, which takes a predominantly positivist research approach in looking at the salesperson's external relationships and related selling skills, this research takes an interpretive approach and focuses on the internal relationships; i.e., the inside selling role of the key account manager. This is an

area which has been identified as requiring further research since the way in which the key account manager operates within the organisation can influence external relationships through maintaining the right balance of perceived customer orientation externally and sales orientation internally (Holt, 2003; Plouffe and Barclay, 2007). The internal dimension of the internal selling role has been shown to be extensive with the key account manager having to navigate through a wide range of relationships in order to meet customer needs (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007). This research focuses on one dimension of the key account management selling role, that of the key account manager's perception of conflict within the organisation and how this conflict is managed. In this research the following three themes are investigated:

- 1) An investigation into the key account manager's understanding of conflict within the organisation, examining the question of what constitutes conflict within the organisation to the key account manager.
- 2) Investigating the key account manager's perception of conflict management behaviours and when these are most effective in the resolution of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict episodes.
- 3) An understanding of the abundance and frequency of occurrence of the conflict episodes as encountered by key account managers within their organisations, which addresses the question of whether conflict is an inherent condition of organisational life or a series of discrete isolated incidents in an otherwise cooperative environment.

In summary, the objective of this research is to explore one aspect of the key account manager's internal selling role which has not been investigated before, that of how key account managers perceive and manage conflict within their own organisation.

1.2.3 Definition of Terms

Although definitions will be given at the appropriate stages of the thesis, the key terms which contextualise the research are given in this section.

For the purpose of this research a *Key Account* is defined as an account where there is increased volume or value potential for the supplier requiring significant strategic involvement with focused efforts and resources (Millman and Wilson, 1996; Napolitano, 1997).

Key Account Management (KAM) is the process by which these strategically important accounts are managed.

The *Key Account Manager* is defined as the sales manager who is responsible for speaking to large, complex, strategically important customers in one voice which represents the full capabilities of the supplier (Napolitano, 1997).

Conflict is the process which begins when one individual or group feels negatively affected by another individual or group (Thomas, 1992). Throughout this thesis, conflict refers to interpersonal conflicts within the organisation; specifically, those the key account manager experiences internally when dealing with another individual or group of individuals where perceived differences in beliefs, values, roles or goals have an impact on the duties performed, to the extent that mutual objectives cannot be achieved.

An *Incident* is a single episode of perceived intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict as described by the key account managers involved.

The *Desired Outcome* referred to in this research is the key account manager's conflict management goal, since the research is based on the perceptions of those key account managers involved. This reflects the concerns of the key account manager and the key account manager's perceptions of the concerns of the other parties involved.

1.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This research takes a grounded approach which is ethnographic in design and guided by the grounded theory method as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1994). In this research theory is built from the key account manager's accounts of any internal conflict

situations and is therefore closely related to the realities of modern key account management daily routines. The research used data obtained from seven different organisations. The unit of analysis in this research is the actual conflict episode as experienced by the key account manager. The study was carried out using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; Bitner, Broome and Tetreault, 1990), as the data collection method, with the key account managers describing the naturally-occurring behaviours adopted when handling intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts whilst carrying out their internal selling duties. The research was conducted retrospectively using the critical incident technique interview, with these interviews being verbatim transcribed and analysed using an interpretive framework for coding (Spiggle, 1994).

1.4 KEY FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Although the critical incident technique has been used widely in both dispute analysis and consumer marketing (Gremmler, 2003), it has not been used before to study the key account manager's internal selling role. Here the critical incident technique interview process proved successful in obtaining rich data detailing the key account manager's perceptions of conflict and the internal selling role.

The results show that key account managers do indeed have an extensive and time-consuming internal selling role to perform which is vital in meeting customers' demands and ultimately achieving sales objectives. Moreover, this research demonstrates the extent to which conflicts are experienced by the key account manager and explores the perceived sources of internal conflict together with the potential consequences. The research shows that key account managers frequently have to handle more than one conflict incident at any one time and that the duration and intensity of any conflict experienced can vary. In examining the behaviours used to manage these incidents of conflict, a variety of skills and behaviours are exhibited and, through the use of the critical incident technique, this research shows both the positive and negative outcomes of the behaviours adopted. The research also shows the complexity of the management styles adopted together with how the nature of the perceived conflict determines the conflict management strategy adopted.

This research shows how conflict is perceived and handled by key account managers in their internal selling role. It expands the complexity perspective of conflict within the organisation and how it is managed. Finally this research empirically establishes the theory of multiple, simultaneous conflict episodes, and conflict from the key account management perspective being a constant feature of organisational life.

This research therefore makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge in the fields of both key account management and conflict management theory which are summarised as follows:

1. Establishing that conflict episodes are a constant and inherent feature of the key account manager's organisational life as opposed to discrete isolated incidents supporting Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint.
2. Establishing that conflict episodes within the organisation do not always occur in isolation, that the key account manager experiences and manages multiple incidents of conflict at the same time.
3. Establishing an understanding of the key account management perspective on the characteristics of conflict within the organisation and the impact conflict has on the internal selling role.

This research also extends existing knowledge of key account management and conflict management both methodologically and theoretically, adding further conceptualisation and new empirical data to an area where there has been little research, that of the key account manager's internal selling role. These are summarised as follows:

1. Extending the use of the critical incident technique within marketing to a study of the effectiveness of conflict management behaviours within the organisation from a key account management perspective.
2. Extending the complexity perspective for the management of conflict within the organisation, specifically the conglomerated complexity perspective, showing

that the key account manager adopts multiple conflict management behaviours in order to manage the frequently occurring complex, multiple conflict episodes.

3. Extending the knowledge of conflict management strategy selection based upon the key account manager's perception of conflict within the organisation.
4. Through the application of the interpretive framework for coding, this research also extends an interpretive research methodology into an area dominated by positivist research methods theory to emerge from the key account manager's real life accounts of conflict within the organisation.

Given the frequency and abundance of conflicts experienced by the key account managers, this research also provides a valuable practitioner contribution, bringing attention to new training requirements for key account managers to develop their understanding of conflict and its management together with their internal selling role.

In summary, this research shows that the conflicts key account managers experience within the organisation do not occur in isolation, that their perception of conflict is multi-dimensional and that conflict is seen as an inherent condition of the key account management selling role. This research moves beyond the traditional two-dimensional dual concern theory for dealing with conflict, showing that the key account manager uses a wide and continually changing range of behaviours to attain the best possible outcome while continuing to service the customer requirements.

1.5 SUMMARY OF THESIS CHAPTERS

The thesis is presented in nine chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 introduces the research and provides an overview the PhD process contextualising the conflict and the key account manager's internal selling role.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature, which starts by looking at the literature on *personal selling*, *key account management* and *internal selling role of the key account manager* concluding the sales section with a review of the literature which covers conflict and personal selling. The chapter then moves on to look at the *conflict* literature, considering the different *levels of conflict*, *conflict typology* and *composition* then moving on to review the literature concerned with *conflict management*. The literature review chapter then puts conflict into the key account management context with a critique of the literature, identifying the research gap, introducing the research question and proposing a *conceptual visualisation* of the phenomenon under investigation.

Chapter 3 presents the research philosophy, design and methodology building a case for *critical realism* and an *interpretive* approach to the investigation of the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role. The chapter then introduces the *critical incident technique* as the research data collection method and an *interpretive framework for coding* as the data analysis method.

Chapter 4 introduces the research findings, presenting a summary of the participant demographic data.

Chapter 5 presents the findings associated with the key account managers' perception of the nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict – theme one under investigation.

Chapter 6 presents the findings associated with the second theme under investigation, from the CIT component of the interviews, exploring how the key account managers handle incidents of conflict within the organisation.

Chapter 7 presents the findings associated with the key account managers' perception of the frequency and abundance of conflict within the organisation – the third theme of the study.

Chapter 8 discusses the findings from the analysis of the CIT interviews conducted, following the three themes outlined above, and presents a theoretical model for the management of multiple, simultaneous incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict within the organisation.

Chapter 9 concludes the research, summarising the findings and presenting the contributions and implications of this research for both academics and practitioners, together with the limitations of the research and opportunities for future research.

An outline of this thesis is presented in Figure 1.1.

1.6 SUMMARY

This chapter has introduced the research by giving a brief overview of the research topic, introducing the research question. It also contextualises the research giving a rationale from both a literature and researcher perspective, and gives some insight into the research design, contribution and limitations. Chapter 2 will now review the literature in greater depth and present a conceptual visualisation of the topic upon which the research is built.

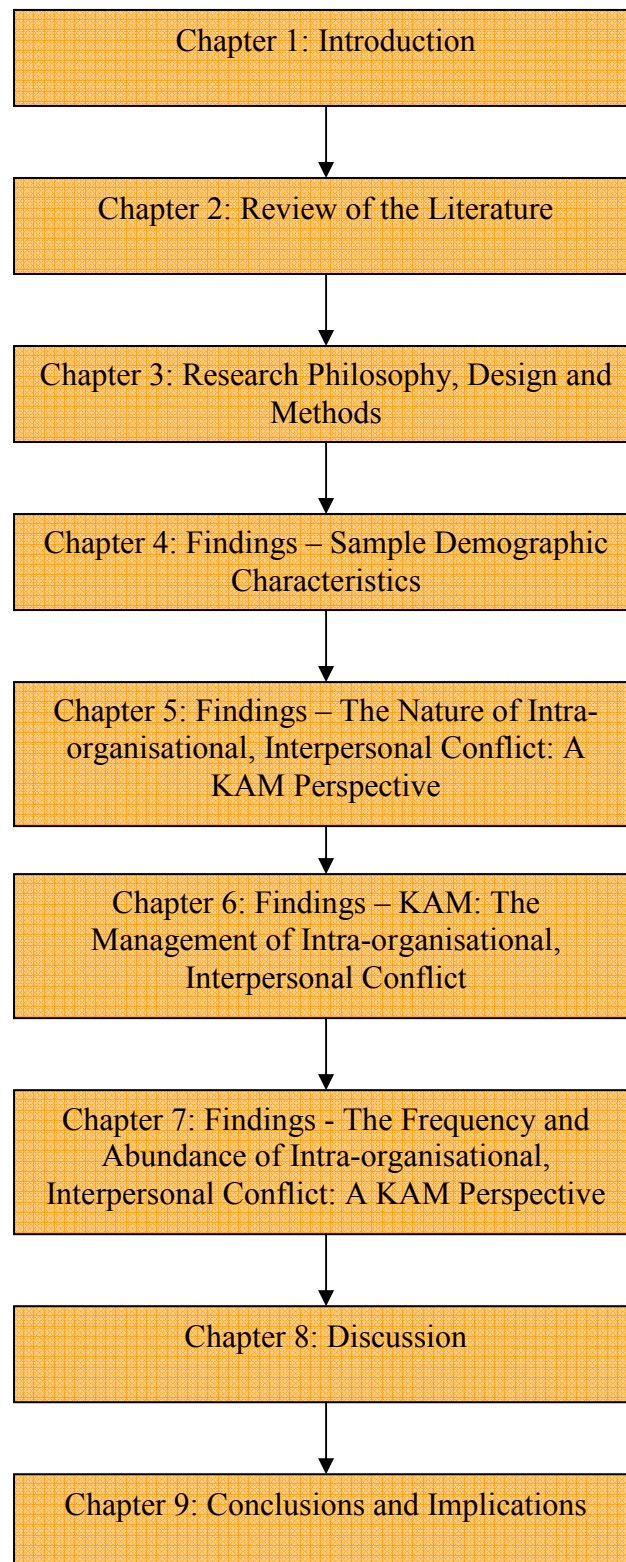


Figure 1.1 Outline of the Thesis

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the literature review is to provide a background to this research and to identify the gaps through which the research will make a contribution. The first part of the literature review relates to the broader field of literature concerned with personal selling, key account management and the role of the key account manager; i.e., putting the research into context. This includes summaries of the literature relating to customer orientation, adaptive behaviour, boundary spanning and the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role. The review then moves on to cover the literature related to organisational conflict and conflict management strategies. Following a critique of the literature reviewed, conclusions are then drawn and the full scope of this research is defined; i.e., the research gap, research question and the resulting conceptual visualisation of the research themes under investigation. A structure of the literature review is represented in figure 2.1.

This is a piece of research into personal selling, specifically the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management role. In order to fully understand the sales role and how it is changing, for both academics' and practitioners' research that explains and predicts salesperson performance has for a long time been at the centre of attention (Sheth, 1976). When considering personal selling, research has primarily dealt with the salesperson's external relationships with buyers and customer purchasing networks (Dwyer, Schurr and Sejo, 1987; Krapfel, Salmond and Spekman, 1991; Weitz 1978), since this is where the sales takes place and the organisation's objectives met. However, with the role of the salesperson changing and more organisations placing greater responsibility on key sales people managing larger more strategic customers, another research stream has started to focus on the internal role of the salesperson in particular, the salesperson, sales manager relationship or the management of role

conflicts and the issues related to salesperson motivation and performance (Ford and Walker, 1975; Pettijohn, Pettijohn and Taylor, 2002).

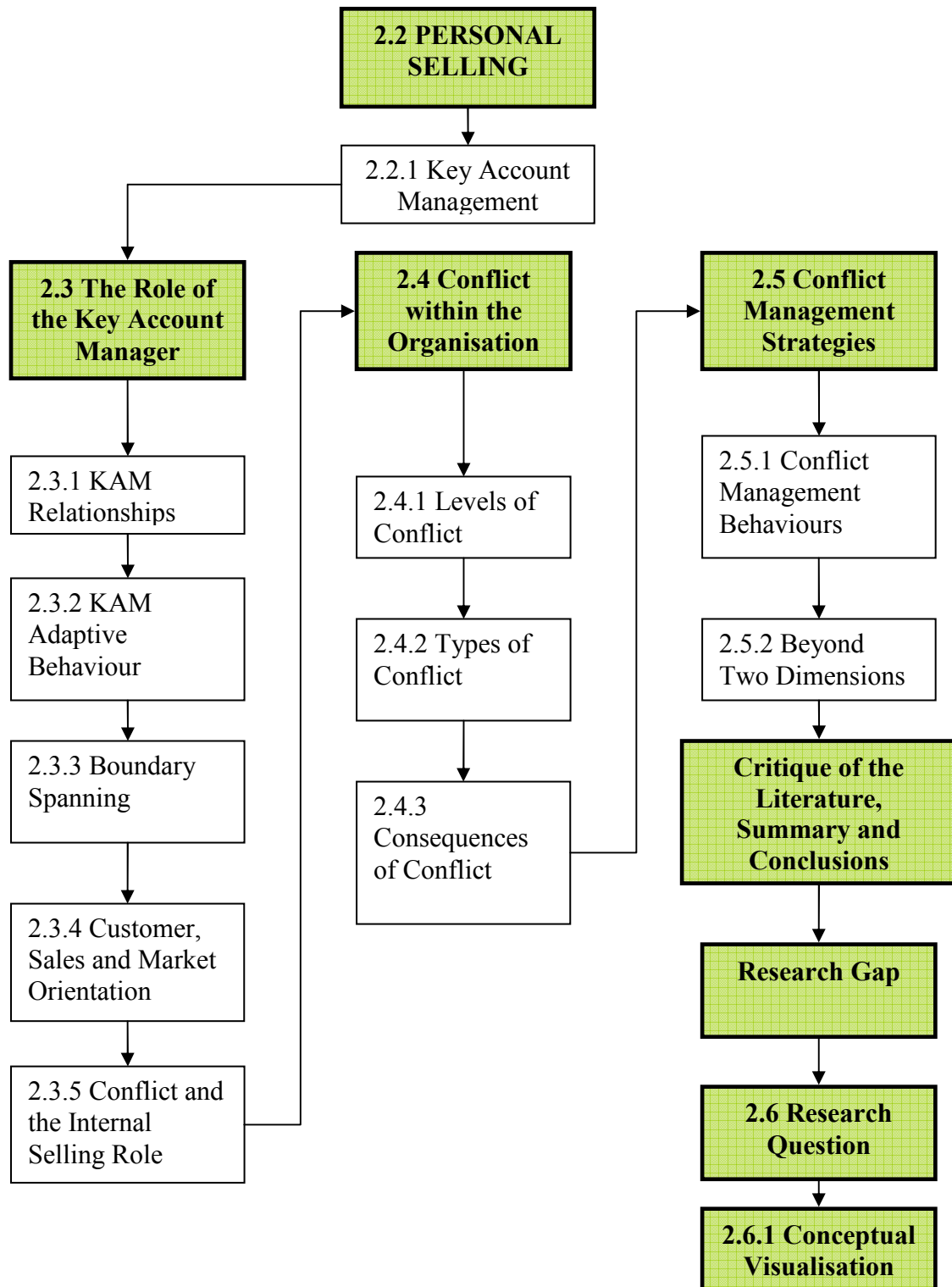


Figure 2.1 Structure of the Literature Review

Following this new trend for intra-organisational personal selling research, this research specifically considers the role of key account managers and the internal dimension of their selling role. The research considers one aspect of the internal selling role which has not been investigated before, that of how key account managers perceive and handle the internal conflicts arising within their organisation as a direct result of their carrying out their internal selling duties.

The internal selling role requires representation of the customers' needs internally, with the key account manager having to negotiate for a wide variety of resources through a diverse portfolio of interpersonal interactions, in many cases having to operate as part of a larger customer-focused team (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). In performing this internal role, key account managers are required to resolve a wide range of interpersonal conflicts which can occur between themselves and other individuals or teams of individuals within the organisation as a direct result of having to manage conflicting objectives (customer and supplier interests). These conflicts, disputes or misunderstandings have to be managed in the best interests of the salesperson's organisation while also attempting to meet the customers' needs thus maintaining the external perception of customer orientation and prolonged mutually beneficial long term relationships (Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002). It is therefore vitally important that key account managers are able to understand the nature of any conflict as it occurs and recognise the behaviours and strategies for handling any conflict in order to gain the best possible outcome both for their own organisation and their customer(s) (Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Bradford *et al.*, 2004).

Conflict has been studied across many disciplines – in economics, sociology, psychology, the political sciences and business administration. International, inter-organisational, intra-organisational, interpersonal and intra-personal conflicts have all been studied extensively resulting in conflict being defined and operationalised in a number of ways with a wide variety of models emerging (Reid, Pullins, Plank and Buehrer, 2004). This research examines one aspect of conflict at one specific level, the intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts experienced by key account managers while performing the internal selling duties and investigates the their understanding of the

nature of any conflict encountered and the behavioural strategies they adopt in order to manage these conflict episodes. In doing so, this research will address some fundamental questions regarding conflict theory which previous research has left unanswered, namely: is conflict an inherent and continual feature of the key account manager's internal selling role as opposed to discrete isolated incidents? Can conflict episodes occur simultaneously throughout varied key account management interactions? Are certain conflict management behaviours only appropriate in certain situations and can these behaviours be changed or modified throughout and across any number of interactions? For this research into multiple, simultaneous, complex intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts, the key account management sales team provides an ideal context, since the key account manager is in a unique position of contradiction, representing the customers' needs internally, while attempting to achieve the organisation's sales goals and margin expectations externally: an organisational paradox in which conflict is inevitable.

In the following sections of the literature review, conflict and conflict management theory will be covered in greater detail after an outline of the literature relating to personal selling in the key account management context.

2.2 PERSONAL SELLING

For many years the view of the salesperson was seen as negative, summoning images of high-pressure transactions motivated by greed and hostility (Jolson, 1989). The job title 'salesperson' encompasses a wide variety of responsibilities and has been categorised into many different taxonomies accordingly (Wotruba, 1991; Moncrief, 1986). Wotruba (1991) goes on to suggest that personal selling has evolved through four eras to where the role of the salesperson, their responsibilities and degree of customer interaction has developed. These eras are: production, where the role of the salesperson is focused on making the sale and is driven by production capability; the sales era, where again the focus is on making the sale but the role of the salesperson has developed to that of a 'persuader' convincing customers to buy products (Weitz and Bradford, 1999); the marketing era, where the salesperson, equipped with market and product knowledge is

able to match the available products to the customer's needs; and the partnering era, where the salesperson focuses on strategic, long term customer relationships creating the customer need and providing a solution. This development of the personal selling role is presented in table 2.1.

| Salesperson Role Era | Objective | Tasks | Activities | Role |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Production | Making the sale | Transactions, individual salesperson taking orders. | Informing the customers of the available products in a transactional selling call | Provider, short term supplier needs, selling what can be made. |
| Sales | Making the sale | Transactional, convincing the customer to take the products available | The hard sell approach persuading the customer to buy | Persuader, short term relationships. |
| Marketing | Satisfying the customers' needs | Matching the available product to the customers' needs, feature advantage benefit. | Influencing customers, using all the available information to match the product to the requirement, market data, and product information and selling style. | Problem solver. Supplying a product to fill a gap the customer identifies, meeting the customer need. Short term relationships. |
| Partnering | Building and maintaining long term customer relationships | Matching the suppliers capabilities with the identified customer need on an ongoing basis | Creating customer value through indemnifying or creating opportunities with the customer. | Value creator, relationship builder. Long term strategic relationships. |

Table 2.1 Summary of the Development of the Salesperson Role

Table 2.1 shows how the role of the salesperson has changed and how the supplier has become more involved in the customers' activities in order to maintain long lasting customer relationships. However, Weitz and Bradford (1999) go on to suggest that all of the salesperson roles are represented across all of the developing eras. That is to say even though the 1990's saw the proliferation of relationship building sales strategies there is still the requirement for a transactional selling role in certain circumstances. They argue that it is the selling role which has also undergone a transition from a transactional, 'one-size-fits-all, canned' approach (Jolson, 1975) to a more relational

customer oriented approach rather than a development of eras (Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Weitz, 1981; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Jolson, 1989).

This new approach to personal selling and sales management is stimulating renewed interest in the sales function as organisations become much more strategic in their selling approach (Ingram, LaForge and Leigh, 2002; Rackham, 1989). Today, personal selling is viewed as a two-way communication process centred on value creation, problem-solving and reaching mutually acceptable solutions to customer needs that the salesperson identifies (Anderson, Hakansson and Johanson, 1994; Sharma, 2000). With this customer oriented approach, sales has become a major boardroom topic as additional resources are required to develop the strategic approach and new skills become necessary in the development of strategic customer focused salespeople (Ingram *et al.*, 2002; Tanner, 2002). This customer-centric approach to selling is referred to as key account management and will be considered in greater detail in the following section as one of the most fundamental changes in the marketing organisation over recent years (Homburg, Workman and Jensen, 2000).

2.2.1 Key Account Management

Key Account Management (KAM) is a strategic selling approach that goes beyond the traditional transactional selling role in order to tackle modern complex issues with larger more dynamic customers (Cheverton, 1999). It enables organisations to make the transition from transactional selling to relationship building and it reaches deep inside both seller and buyer organisations, spanning a large number of departments where individuals have to operate, in many cases, as part of a much larger team (buying and selling) in order to meet their requirements (Campbell and Cunningham, 1983; Lambe and Spekman, 1997; Homburg, Workman and Jensen, 2002; Donaldson 2007). In this respect, KAM is undoubtedly more complex and more difficult than simple transactional sales activity with the stakes usually being much higher, with more powerful customers expecting far more from their suppliers in terms of total value across all departments (Cheverton, 1999).

This customer focus and alignment of the organisation to its customers rather than products or markets is relatively new and can be traced back to the creation of the National Account Association in 1964. It has been argued that KAM is one of the most fundamental changes in the marketing orientation of the firm that has taken place over the last forty years, (Homburg *et al.*, 2000). Yet, given the growing importance of key account management, there has been surprisingly little academic research leaving the field still in its infancy and only partially understood (Millman and Wilson, 1996; Homburg *et al.*, 2002).

For the purpose of this literature review, a key account can be defined as an account where there is increased volume or value potential for the supplier requiring significant strategic involvement with focused efforts and resources (Millman and Wilson, 1996; Napolitano, 1997). This definition is used in order to capture the different terminology and many different adjectives used to describe accounts of such strategic importance; i.e., major, key, global, national and corporate.

In using this definition, strategic account management and strategic account selling are also encompassed and included in the term key account management, because KAM is the most accepted term in recent publications and widely accepted across the business world (Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Lambe and Spekman, 1997). Furthermore, with many companies using several different terms to signify the varying levels of strategic importance of their customers, for the purpose of this research all high value / volume accounts requiring the additional resources which are considered to be of strategic importance to the supplier will be referred to as key accounts. This allows the key accounts of smaller suppliers to be considered equally to those of larger suppliers; it is the degree of strategic importance to the organisation that the customer presents which determines key account status. This is, again, consistent with other definitions which define a key account as a customer in a business-to-business market identified by a selling company as of strategic importance (McDonald, Rodgers and Woodburn, 2000).

Modern market forces, increased competition and globalisation mean companies today are faced with more demanding and more powerful customers, with rationalised supply

bases and central buying roles, demanding additional resources and added value from their suppliers in every aspect of their relationship (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). With increasing levels of competition and technological change across all markets, companies are forced to gain a competitive advantage by forming strategic alliances and closer longer lasting relationships with their key customers (Millman and Wilson, 1996). The salesperson alone is not able to meet the increased complexity of demands from customers and requires the support of other functional groups within the organisation (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). In response to these changing demands from their customers, organisations have increasingly focused their resources on specific customers considered to be of greater importance, shifting resources from product-based divisions to customer-focused business units; i.e., transition from the production era to the partnering era (Homburg *et al.*, 2000; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). These accounts of increased strategic importance are commonly referred to as *key accounts* and require specialised *key account managers* in order to manage the diverse portfolio of relationships across both customer and supplier organisations working as part of a customer focused team (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). This type of customer-centric strategic alliance is referred to as key account management (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

A number of themes under the general heading of 'Key Account Management' have been discussed by many academics and a wide variation in the conceptualisation of the nature of KAM has been the result (Ojasalo, 2001). Research has covered the customer angle of KAM, organisational buying behaviour (Webster and Wind, 1972), network research into personal relationships between buyer and seller organisations (Hakansson and Snehota 1989; Ritter and Gemunden, 2003) a whole separate area of research into relationship and services marketing (Gummerrsson, 1987; Gronroos, 1990; Berry, 1995), logistics (Christopher, 1994) and the key accountisation of the organisation (Pardo, Salle and Spencer, 1995). Research has also covered individual business relationships (Ojasalo, 2001), strategic alliances (Lambe and Spekman, 1997) account portfolio theory (Fiocca, 1982) and to a lesser extent the intra-organisational dimension of KAM, what makes KAM successful (Workman, Homburg and Jensen, 2003) or how key account managers operate within their organisation (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007).

Depending upon the supplier's position, a key account can differ in many ways; it can operate locally or globally, be larger in comparison to its supplier (or smaller) and may exist as more than one customer or only one critical customer. Key accounts do, however, all exhibit a willingness to establish long term relationships with their suppliers which requires the supplier to consider them of strategic importance. In order to establish these long term relationships the supplier needs to invest in the necessary training, recruitment and development of key account managers to manage the communication process across a wide variety of contacts within both customer and supplier organisations. We will now move on to discuss the literature related to the role of the key account manager.

2.3 THE ROLE OF THE KEY ACCOUNT MANAGER

Business relationships within key accounts are typically managed by a key account manager, defined as the sales manager who is responsible for speaking to large, complex, strategically important customers in one voice which represents the full capabilities of the supplier (Napolitano, 1997). Key account management revolves around how businesses can maximise their profitability from their clients and it involves an extensive relationship management and account planning processes. In simple terms, a good key account manager would know the exact mood and needs of the client before commencing the meeting. The basis of good account planning primarily involves the following basic principles:

- Understanding the history of the account
- Tracking the growth of the account
- Identifying and understanding the right people
- Being informed about the competitors within the account
- Planning for future interactions

Externally, knowing the right people is a critical component to growing an account, understanding who the gatekeepers and decision makers are. Interacting with the gatekeepers will only get the account manager through the door; it is those who are able

to make the decisions that need to be targeted. Internally, the key account manager has to match the available resources to the customers' need, frequently dealing with many different departments.

2.3.1 Key Account Management Relationships

Key account managers play a key role in developing long term customer relationships where there is the potential for the buyers to have a greater loyalty to the salesperson than to the company they represent (Anderson and Robertson, 1995). Developing and managing these relationships is considered to be a key component of a key account manager's success in modern organisations where contact can vary widely (Leigh and Marshall, 2001). It is therefore crucial that key account managers are able to manage these relationships, especially since the characteristics of the selling situation may change with each selling interaction and the sales task or product proposition may differ each time from the requirements of the buyer or customer (Weitz, 1981). The key account manager will consequently need to be both able and willing to adapt in order to meet the customer needs and maintain the perception of customer orientation and key account status. With the selling role having undergone a transition from a more transactional, 'canned' (Jolson, 1975) approach to a longer term, relational customer oriented approach (Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Weitz, 1981; Ford *et al.*, 1998), the key account manager, as part of this change, is having to manage a diverse portfolio of interactions with the customer's purchasing network and also communicate internally, effectively operating as part of a large customer focused team (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). Moreover, key account managers are becoming increasingly more involved with internal supply networks outside of their traditional external selling roles in order to more effectively carry out their business objectives. From the buyers' perspective the increased tendency to forge longer term relationships provides benefits in that the supplier better understands their business and is therefore able to provide service solutions in line with their tactical and strategic objectives (Bradford *et al.*, 2004). However, maintaining this buyer perception requires the key account salesperson to manage the customer's interests internally with the broad scope and intensity of these long term complex interactions, inevitably resulting in some degree of conflict. It is

therefore vital that salespeople are able to understand the nature and sources of conflicts as they arise and understand the various methods of handling these conflicts when they occur, maintaining the external perception of customer orientation (Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

The level of collaboration which the key account manager has can vary widely internally and externally, ranging from simple high volume sales arrangements to truly collaborative alliances (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). This range of KAM relationships is outlined in table 2.2 and details of each of the stages are presented later (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Millman and Wilson, 1995; Lambe and Spekman, 1997; Wotruba, 1991; McDonald *et al.*, 2000).

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Author(s) |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|
| Awareness | Exploration | Expansion | Commitment | Collaboration | Disintegration | Dwyer <i>et al.</i> , (1987) |
| Provider | Persuader | Prospector | Problem Solver | Procreator | N/A | Wotruba (1991) |
| Pre-KAM | Early-KAM | Mid-KAM | Partnering-KAM | Synergistic-KAM | Uncoupling-KAM | Millman and Wilson (1995) |
| Spot Market Transactions | Repeated Transactions | Long term Relationships | Alliances and Partnerships | Vertical Integration | N/A | Lambe and Spekman (1997) |
| Exploratory | Basic | Cooperative | Interdependent | Integrated | N/A | McDonald, <i>et al.</i> , (2000) |

Table 2.2 The Range of KAM Relationships

Table 2.2 shows the stages of key account management as presented in the literature. The similarities are clear, from Dwyer *et al.*'s (1987) initial model covering awareness to collaboration through Wotruba's (1991) five-stage model of the development of personal selling approaches and the later Millman and Wilson (1995) six-stage model. All of the stages across the models clearly demonstrate the many different communication skills required by the key account manager and also advocate different

approaches being required to meeting the wide variety of customer needs. The primary difference between the models is in the terminology used and whether or not a sixth 'disintegration' stage is included. All these levels highlight the potential complexity in key account management relationships and the wide variation in the degree of interaction or customer orientation which is required (Millman and Wilson, 1995). Taking Millman and Wilson's (1995) and McDonald *et al.*'s (2000) terminology, the role of the key account manager at each stage will now be explained.

1. Exploratory KAM

Suppliers have to determine which of their customers will warrant becoming key accounts. Not all accounts will be key accounts and require the same amount of resource allocation. At the pre or exploratory KAM stage, information is gathered about the account to determine whether or not any potential to develop as a key account exists (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

2. Basic KAM

The early or exploratory KAM stage is concerned with investigating further the customer potential by identifying the culture, motives, and concerns of the customer while considering competition from other suppliers. The customer decision-making process needs to be considered in detail together with the structure and nature of the decision-making teams within the account to determine how accessible they are. At this stage the key account manager becomes more account focused and adapts in order to more closely match the buyer's requirements with the focus of the sales effort being on building trust through consistent performance and open communication. At this stage there will still be some uncertainty as to how the relationship might develop and whether the investment will be worthwhile in terms of customer performance (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

3. Cooperative KAM

At the mid or basic KAM stage the relationships with the customer have developed with an increase in the levels of trust and through the diversity of problems encountered by

the key account manager. The number of contacts within the customer will have increased with the key account manager having to manage a number of different relationships covering a range of issues from product development to supply chain and logistics through to the regular buying activities. At this stage the potential for conflict has increased as has the range of skills required by the salesperson in order to effectively manage communications (Reid *et al.*, 2004). The importance of the account within the supplier management team will have increased as will the levels of resource allocation as the account requires constant review to monitor competitor activity with the supplier not yet having achieved exclusivity with the customer (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

4. Interdependent KAM

At the partnership or interdependent KAM stage of the development of a key account, the supplier may be viewed as more of an external resource – a partner having a specific role within the customer. There will be greater commitment to the relationship from both parties with strong strategic alliances being formed. More sensitive information will be shared such as open book costing, profit and loss accounts with the focus being upon joint problem solving (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

5. Integrated KAM

At this stage, as the title suggests, the relationship moves beyond a supplier customer relationship and becomes more of a synergy with the supplier becoming vertically integrated into their customer and capable of autonomous problem solving with total trust on the customer's part (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

6. Uncoupling KAM

Finally, not all relationships can be or need to be maintained once KAM status is achieved and in many instances after continuous evaluation there may be a need to dissolve the relationship. This is often viewed negatively but can be more constructive with parties deciding, when the time is right, to get out of a relationship in order to reduce costs and reallocate resource where it is needed the most.

| | KAM Stage | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|---|
| | <i>Exploratory</i> | <i>Basic</i> | <i>Cooperative</i> | <i>Interdependent</i> | <i>Integrated</i> |
| Characteristics of the KAM relationship | Simple, one to one contact | Predominantly buyer / seller contact | Wider purchasing network contacts | Key supplier status | Integrated organisations across many departments |
| | Supplier centric presentations | Power based relationship each seeking a competitive advantage | Increased commitment to the relationship with longer meetings | High trust and openness with shared information | Joint R&D focus on innovation |
| | Basic response to assumed customer needs | At worst a confrontational relationship with high levels of conflict | Attention to detail and reporting to provide account information | Access through many people in both supply and purchase networks | Open book cost relationship |
| | Volume and Profit potential driven | Price still dominates | Increased trust and openness | Continuous improvement programmes in place, pricing now stable | Joint marketing and business plans |
| | Customer seeking assurances | Focus on driving volume potential | Contact still facilitated through the buyer and seller | Key account manager's role becomes more of a coordinator | Shared communications networks, customer sited supplier personnel |
| | Competitiveness predominantly judged on price | High competition with alternative suppliers | Greater risk of setbacks due to unresolved conflict | More focus on supply chain management and cost reduction through engineering | Collaborative approach to developing the market |
| | Buyer acts as a 'gatekeeper' | Supply can be inconsistent due to disputes | Increased workload on both sides | Focus on customer satisfaction at all times | Joint focus teams |

Table 2.3 Characteristics of KAM Relationships at Different Stages.

It is important to note that a customer at any stage may be considered a key account and that relationship status can move both ways dependent upon the key account categorisation by the supplier and the level of allocated resources. This is presented as a summary in table 2.3 giving the characteristics of the key account management relationships at each of the different KAM stages. The table shows the wide and varied sets of characteristics a key account manager will need to display depending upon the degree of customer relationship. The key account management approach requires the

salesperson to have a high level of customer knowledge in order to fully understand the range of opportunities which the supplier's capabilities can meet. In order to achieve this increased customer focus and maintain sales performance, the key account manager's skills have developed beyond being able to present product features to adapting to meet the customer requirement based on information received during the sales interaction (Weitz, Sujan and Sujan, 1986). To put the developing role of the key account manager into context, the literature concerned with adaptive behaviour will now be examined; this demonstrates salesperson adaptiveness and the ability to change behaviour based on perceptions of the changing micro environment. This suggested theory will be come more relevant later in the chapter, when considering the conflict management strategies managers adopt.

2.3.2 Key Account Manager Adaptive Behaviour

Prior to 1981 and the development adaptive selling theory, the study of sales behaviours was limited to understanding the effectiveness of the different types of message being delivered by salespeople in order to meet their sales objectives (Jolson, 1975). However, research has frequently suggested that a salesperson's personality and physical characteristics are important in their success (Churchill, Ford, Hartley and Walker, 1985). Salespeople have to be enthusiastic about what they do, about their organisation and their products. The key account manager is in the position of having to manage a range of relationships and has to have the right balance of a number of desirable characteristics – enthusiasm, confidence, intelligence, knowledge and communication skills – in order to effectively manage the customer relationship (Donaldson, 1998; 2007). The relationship-managing key account manager has to unite the required characteristics with the required skills, working smarter rather than harder to identify and meet customer needs (Weitz, 1981).

Subsequent research into working smart, contingency selling or customer orientation was brought together and structured into a contingency framework (Weitz, 1981) as shown in figure 2.2. This framework was developed from a scheme for classifying variables related to salesperson performance and focuses on the effectiveness of

salespeople in the micro environment of the sales interaction but excludes the macro environmental factors which include variables such as territorial characteristics, workload of the salesperson and effort expended covering a territory (Weitz, 1981). Research following the development of the contingency model for adaptive selling has focused on salesperson effectiveness in particular selling behaviours and how these can be developed to enhance performance (Miles, Arnold and Nash, 1990; Weitz *et al.*, 1986; Park and Holloway, 2003; Gengler, Howard and Zolner, 1995).

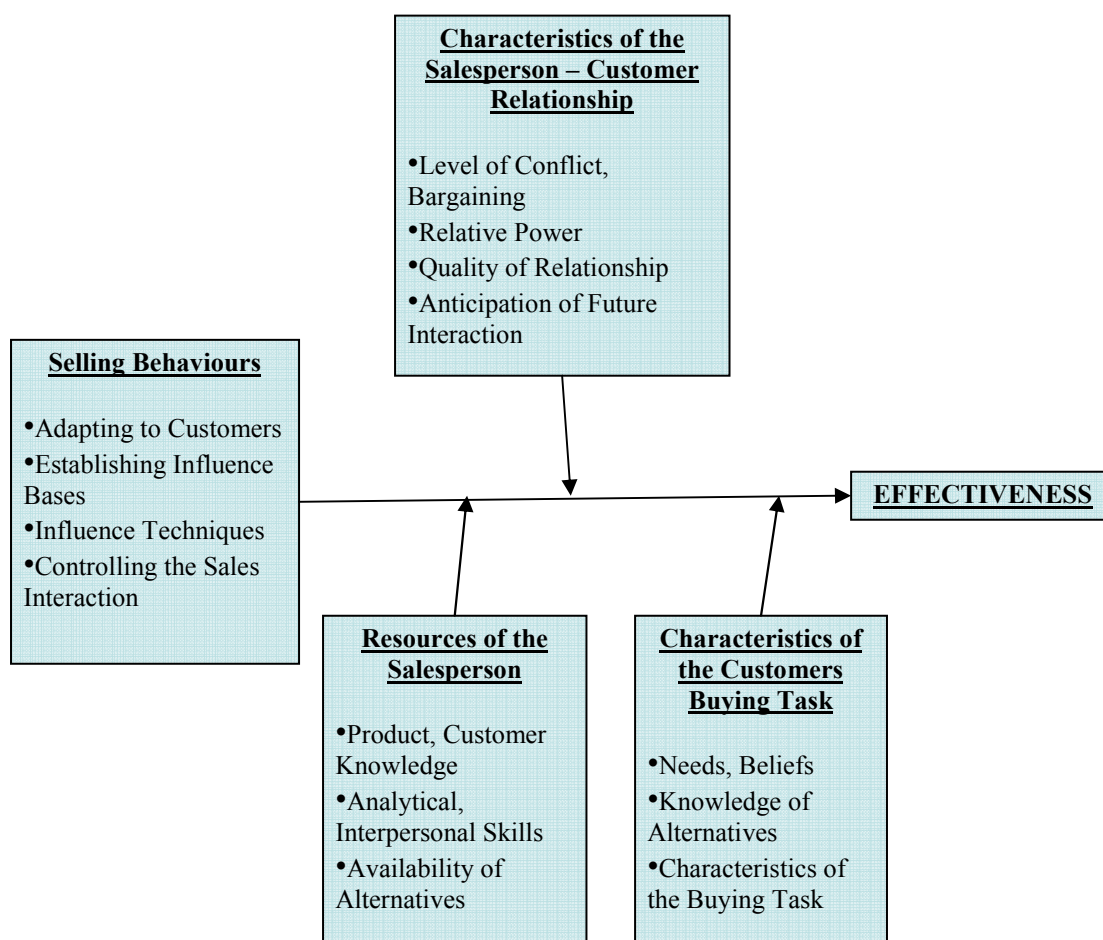


Figure 2.2 A Contingency Model for Salesperson Effectiveness, from Weitz (1981)

The contingency framework has the basic postulate that the effectiveness of sales behaviours across customer interactions is contingent upon, or moderated by, a

salesperson's resources, the nature of the buying task, the customer-salesperson relationship and the interactions of the three. Weitz (1981) goes on to suggest that all previous research had ignored the unique advantage of the salesperson within the organisation's communication mix to adapt and match their behaviour to any specific customer situations they encounter, with the salesperson taking the most advantageous approach on any one given occasion.

Adaptive selling is defined as the altering of sales behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation (Weitz *et al.*, 1986; Porter, Weiner and Frankwick, 2003). It was proposed as a conceptual framework to direct future research into the characteristics of both salespeople and their customers.

The whole idea for this approach is not new. Gwinner in 1968 presented a four-stage model for selling with each stage being suitable for a particular selling environment; Thompson in 1973 suggested that there is no single sales situation and no single way to sell; and Soldow and Thomas in 1984 suggested that relational communication; i.e., the form of the communication not the content, affects behavioural outcomes in the selling situation. It has also been suggested that different selling strategies are needed for new and established customers (Kahn and Shuchman, 1961) and Blake and Mouton (1970) looked at different strategies related to purchase orientation versus person orientation while Buzzota, Lefton and Sherberg (1972) looked at the sales relationships and different levels of hostility. Krapfel *et al.*, (1991) suggested six strategic relationship alternatives in terms of managing the power position with key customers – collaboration, negotiation, administration, domination, accommodation, submission – which show some similarity to Thomas' (1976) conflict management styles and Blake and Mouton's (1970) management behaviours (Krapfel *et al.*, 1991). These relationship management alternatives relate to the account specific characteristics and restraints showing links to conflicting objectives in key account management.

Weitz (1981) went on to make a number of propositions regarding adaptive behaviour and personal selling, suggesting that where a salesperson is able to adapt their

behaviour to a specific selling situation they will be better at presenting a product and solution to the customer's problem (Periatt, LeMay and Chakrabarty, 2004), thus proposing that the proper use of adaptive selling strategies is critical to a salesperson's effectiveness. It has since been shown that salespeople who are able to adapt their style to the situation will have a strategic advantage over those who can not or will not adapt (Blackshear and Plank, 1994; Miles *et al.*, 1990).

Having a clearer understanding of adaptive selling behaviour, its underlying dimensions and structures are still very much at the centre of research into personal selling of the positive influence, since it has been shown to have a positive impact on salesperson performance (Goolsby, Lagace and Boorum 1992; Leong, Busch and John, 1989; Del Vecchio Zemanek, McIntyre and Claxton 2004). In long term relationships, such as those of the key account manager, the characteristics of the selling situation can change with each customer interaction and the sales task or product proposition may differ at each subsequent sales interaction from the initial requirements of the buyer or customer (Weitz, 1981). It is therefore crucial that a salesperson is able to manage a portfolio of customer interactions effectively (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Moreover, adaptive selling strategies can have both positive and negative outcomes and are moderated by the nature of the selling micro environment, the capabilities of the salespeople involved and the nature of any existing conflict situations which the salesperson may have to deal with (Weitz *et al.*, 1986). To be able practice adaptive selling techniques, salespeople must be able to acknowledge that different approaches are needed for different situations, have the conviction to use different approaches, possess a wide and varied knowledge of their customers (a key component of key account management) and be effective at gathering information during the customer interaction (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). Salespeople with higher levels of these factors should therefore be able to adapt their communication style more effectively and persuasively (Boorum, Goolsby and Ramsey, 1998) potentially reducing any inherent conflict in the relationship.

Outcomes from studies into measuring adaptive selling (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Robinson, Marshall, Moncrief and Lassk, 2002) and the antecedents to adaptive selling (Brown, Widing and Coulter, 1991; Shoemaker and Johlke, 2002) have suggested links

to gender (Levy and Sharma, 1994), customer orientation (Thomas, Soutar and Ryan, 2001) social cognition (Morgan and Stoltman, 1990; Porter and Inks, 2000) and the effectiveness of the buyer seller relationship (Wagner, Klein and Keith, 2003). If a buyer perceives more customer orientation there is likely to be less conflict on the premise that the customer has the perception that the salesperson has linked their proposition to their needs (Reid *et al.*, 2004). From the development of the contingency model and throughout subsequent research Weitz (1981) Weitz *et al.*, (1986) and Spiro and Weitz (1990) have suggested that adaptive selling is not a simple process but dependent upon two levels of contingency, the salesperson, their specific capabilities and behaviours, and the nature of the selling situation which will include the nature of any conflict. If the effective salesperson is to 'work smart' interpreting and managing the situation then both sets of contingencies need to be considered together (Sujan, Weitz and Kumar, 1994). This higher emphasis on meeting the customer's needs, on fully understanding the customer and on listening to the customer is referred to as customer orientation and is a key component of the key account management process.

If this applies to the external sales relationships and customer orientation and if the customer perceives the salesperson's degree of customer orientation, can salespeople apply the same adaptive, behavioural strategies internally when managing intra-organisational relationships while acting as the customer advocate? In doing so the key account manager has to handle a wide range of internal relationships and operate as part of a wide virtual team dealing with internal colleagues with whom they have no direct influence. The key account manager is therefore in the unique position of having to manage a range of relationships across many functions within the organisation acting in a boundary spanning position (Lambe and Spekman, 1997; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005) a

2.3.3 The Boundary Spanning Role of the Key Account Manager

The literature shows that the key account manager is very much the person in the middle having to perform a number of activities outside of the traditional selling role (Mintzberg, 1979; Lysonski and Johnson, 1983). These activities or communications

across a number of different groups both within their own organisation and that of the customer fall under the term boundary spanning (Battencourt *et al.*, 2005).

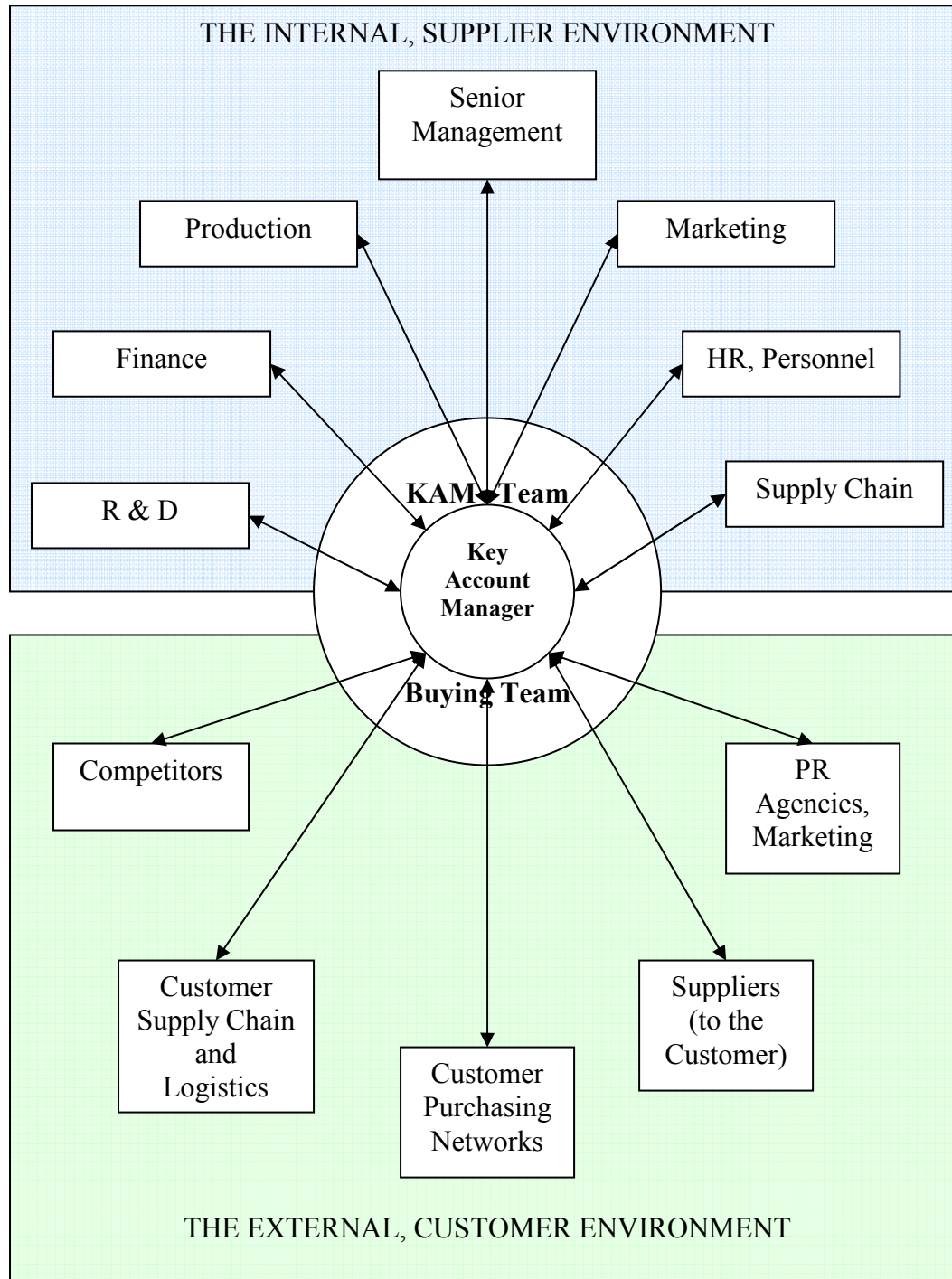


Figure 2.3 The Key Account Manager's Boundary Spanning Role, from Lysonski and Johnson (1983)

The boundary spanner takes up a position at the periphery of the organisation and carries out activities which relate to elements both inside and out. With the increased complexity of the key account management role, the key account managers become the boundary spanner between the supplying organisation and the customer. This is outlined in figure 2.3 adapted from Lysonski and Johnson's 1983 model for the boundary spanning role of the sales manager. The boundaries are invisible barriers which the key account manager has to penetrate in order to effectively communicate and manage both customer and supplier expectations. The key account manager therefore frequently has to deal with a wide variety of conflicting objectives serving both internal and external masters (Ryals and Bruce, 2006).

The literature goes on to suggest the critical and unique role the salesperson has within the organisation, different from other employees in that they have so many internal relationships to manage (Cravens, Ingram, LaForge and Young, 1993). The uniqueness is further emphasised through the customer orientation of the salesperson, where they have to act as the customer advocate within the organisation (Battencourt *et al.*, 2005). They also have boundary spanning positions outside of the organisation where they act as an advocate of their own organisation not only with the customer but with other influencing parties.

Finally it is proposed that the salesperson has one final boundary spanning role in delivering service quality across all boundaries, maintaining the required perception to achieve their objectives. Battencourt *et al.*, (2005) go on to suggest that it is the intra-organisational dimension of the salesperson's role, or customer orientation, which is more of an acquired skill.

The salesperson is trained to deliver the required service quality and deal with the customer outside of the organisation. However, the internal dimension of their selling role, although adding value through influencing others to fully understand the customer requirement the role is under-researched (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005).

In acting as the central contact, the salesperson encounters the inherent conflict associated with the external selling role (Weitz and Bradford, 1999) and the conflict this in turn generates internally with the supporting groups. The salesperson has to be focused on the external goals of maintaining customer relationships and growing sales while the support groups may have conflicting internal goals focused on cost control and productivity. The salesperson therefore has the responsibility of managing customer expectation in line with the internal support groups' goals (market orientation). It has been shown that the management of these internal conflicts can influence customer relationships and that the salesperson's exhibited external behaviours resulting from internal conflicts directly affects the buyer's commitment to the relationship (Lysonski and Johnson, 1983; Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002). In order to adapt, the salesperson must understand conflict, be able to identify conflict when it occurs and adapt to manage the situation. Under these circumstances, adaptive behaviour in the boundary spanning role becomes a tool for conflict management within the buyer seller relationship as well as being a tool for increased sales performance (Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

The key account manager, when acting as the internal boundary spanner, encounters a wide range of conflicts associated with the ambiguity of their internal role. As the customer advocate they encounter conflicting objectives with other internal employees where there is an incompatibility with objectives or expectations associated with their roles (Lysonski and Johnson, 1983). The key account manager has to represent the customers needs internally (customer orientation), their sales needs externally (sales orientation) and communicate the necessary information internally so both requirement can be met by the form (market orientation). It is this complexity in the boundary spanning role which is considered next.

2.3.4 Customer, Sales and Market Orientation and the Supplying Organisation

In a related stream of literature to that of key account management, research suggests that customer orientation positively affects the customer's response to the salesperson, and that it is the salesperson who is more aligned and knowledgeable of their customer

who is more likely to elicit a favourable response (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Jones, Busch and Dacin, 2003; Williams and Attaway, 1996; O'Hara, Boles and Johnston, 1991). Customer orientation is defined as the selling behaviour in which the salesperson assists the customer to satisfy their long term needs by placing the customer before the supplier (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). This is the opposite position to that of salesperson orientation which places the wants and needs of the salesperson and supplying organisation before that of the customer (Rozell, Pettijohn and Parker, 2004). Therefore in the relational selling era the emphasis is on creating customer value, an important component of key account management where the focus is on the salesperson to gain a competitive advantage through the acquisition of customer trust acting internally as their advocate fully utilising the firm's resources to meet their needs (Guenzi, 2003; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). It is not just the degree of customer advocacy but how this is communicated internally, how both firm and market intelligence are interpreted and applied in order to maintain the perception of customer orientation (Kothandaraman and Wilson, 2000, 2001; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Sheth, Sisodia and Sharma, 2000).

Having reviewed key account management and the roles of the key account manager, it is clear that the transition in sales which has led to KAM is a result of increased customer orientation (Wotruba, 1991; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Jones *et al.*, 2003). In considering the supplying organisation's strategic orientation to meet the customer's needs, another stream of research suggests that the degree to which the salesperson perceives the marketing strategy satisfies what they believe to be the customer need is crucial in maintaining the external relationship. This market orientation is defined as the supplying organisation's generation of market intelligence together with the dissemination of that intelligence across all departments together with a responsiveness and willingness to act on this knowledge (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Jones *et al.*, 2003; Lings and Greenley, 2005). Moreover, relating this to the customer experience, Jaworski and Kohli suggest that internal market orientation is how the organisation's overall market intelligence is utilised to match the customer's needs. In this respect, the organisation's market orientation becomes the application of market knowledge in the strategic process, directing the key account manager towards creating customer value (Slater 1997; Naude, Desai and Murphy 2003). Schwepker and Good (2004) add to this

by suggesting that the organisation wanting to develop a more customer oriented sales force needs to have the right balance internally between the ethical climate and the target orientation of the firm. That is to say, the organisation which has the higher focus on achieving the sales targets may be less focused on building and maintaining customer relationships and therefore reduce the external perception of customer orientation in turn affecting sales performance (Schwepker and Good, 2004).

The key account manager therefore takes up a unique position within the organisation having to represent their customer needs within the organisation while utilising the firm's market orientation to create customer value; here, the key account manager adopts a boundary spanning role within the organisation (Ryals and Bruce, 2006). In this role the key account manager's understanding of the customer's needs and expectations is disseminated throughout the organisation, this market intelligence providing the basis of the strategic approach with the customer. The market oriented organisation needs customer oriented key account managers to identify, create and meet the demands of their strategically important customers (Periatt *et al.*, 2004). In order to effectively communicate the customer needs within the organisation, the key account manager has to deal with a number of invisible barriers in order to meet their objectives. The management of these barriers is the boundary spanning role of the key account manager, the interface between the external customer environment and the internal supplier environment (Lysonski and Johnson, 1983) and the interface where the key account manager experiences intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict.

2.3.5 Role Conflict and the Key Account Manager's Internal Selling Role

Mallen (1963) stated that the situation of the selling relationship is conflicting in its very nature, with conflict being embedded in the exchange. It is in the seller's interest to gain the highest return from the exchange and the buyer's interest to minimise the cost. In personal selling, conflict, by the very nature of the selling process, is inherent and will naturally arise between the salesperson and buyer (Emiliani, 2003); as a result a certain amount of conflict will also arise between the salesperson and the internal supply network as the salesperson strives to meet the needs of both the customer and their own organisation. As discussed previously key account managers require a range

of skills and resources in order to manage their communication processes. Since the different actors in the supply network are likely to view their roles, tasks and relationships differently there is inevitably going to be a certain amount of conflict generated, particularly when the salesperson acts in the customer's best interest. It is this perceived difference in role related objectives or expectations which is commonly referred to as role ambiguity conflict (Walker and Churchill, 1975; Lysonski and Johnson, 1983; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005). This potential for conflict within the organisation presents a problem for the salesperson due to the negative reactions people often have to conflict situations (Walker and Churchill, 1975; De Dreu, 1997). This negative perception of conflict can lead to key account manager de-motivation and the perception of job insecurity. It has been suggested that this in turn has a negative impact on salesperson adaptiveness and performance (Reisel, Chia and Maloles, 2005). Although the evolution of personal selling into a more complex, customer focused, strategic activity has escalated it as boardroom topic in almost all organisations, surprisingly there has been very little research into conflict within personal selling (Reid *et al.*, 2004) and what there is has tended to focus on role conflicts between the salesperson and their manager (Ford and Walker, 1975) or conflict within the salesperson / buyer dyadic relationship (Bradford, 1999). The salesperson is in the unique position of having to manage a range of relationships across many functions within the organisation acting in a boundary spanning position (Lambe and Spekman, 1997; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005) and will have to handle both dyadic and multi party conflict episodes internally and externally. Moreover, research has tended to examine the linear, dyadic relationships in which the salesperson is involved and this does not account for the influences the many other relationships the salesperson has and how they are connected.

With conflict being an important dynamic in the supply network (Brown and Day, 1981), the management of conflict will play an important role for the key account manager. It is the communication behaviours adopted by salespeople which are considered to be a key antecedent to conflict and conflict management, with previous research into the management of these communication behaviours at the point of interaction largely being attributed to adaptive selling (Wilmot and Hocker, 1985;

Weitz, 1981). The literature suggests that in order to further understand the complex key account management role, future research should be aimed at understanding the conflict generated internally where the salesperson represents the customer's requirements and the behaviours adopted to manage that conflict (Reid *et al.*, 2004; Plouffe and Barclay, 2007; Leigh and Marshall, 2001; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005).

2.3.6 Summary

The salesperson needs to be able to recognise conflict when it occurs and adapt their behaviour accordingly (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Furthermore, research has shown that resolving a wide range of internal conflicts is necessary in maintaining a consistent external image (Kothandaraman and Wilson, 2000, 2001; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Sheth *et al.*, 2000). With opposing interests being inherent in buyer seller relationships due to the very nature of the roles involved (Weitz and Bradford, 1999) together with the salesperson having to manage both the interests of their organisation and the customer, there is an almost constant state of conflict existing throughout the supplier relationship network. This makes the salespersons' internal relationships an ideal area for the study of conflict episodes and how they are managed.

Taking a key account perspective, the key account manager is the central figure in the customer supplier relationship, working in a boundary spanning position acting as the principal contact with the customer and their organisation's internal support functions (Leifer and Delbecq, 1978; Hakansson and Wootz, 1979; Vaaland and Hakansson, 2003; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005). It is therefore vital that the key account manager is able to identify and manage any internal conflicts as they occur and prevent them affecting the relationships the manager has externally with the customer. The key account manager will need to adopt appropriate behaviours in order to manage these conflict episodes and gain the maximum benefit from their boundary spanning position for both the customer and the internal groups.

In order to continually meet the customers' needs, the key account manager needs to influence a wide variety of internal groups, such as logistics, marketing and finance,

while undertaking a variety of tasks which may not be in line with any particular group's objectives. Acting internally, the key account manager is likely to encounter a diverse portfolio of conflict episodes and needs to effectively resolve those conflicts in order to maintain the consistent external perception of customer orientation. In order to manage the conflict episodes the key account manager will need to fully understand the nature of the conflict and the management strategies available to deal with the conflict and have the skills to adapt their behaviour accordingly (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). The next section of the literature review will now consider the literature associated with conflict and its management.

2.4 UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

Conflict is a potential consequence of interdependent relationships, arising from highly divergent needs of two or more parties, disagreements, misunderstandings, misalignment of resources or any of a number of intangible factors. Conflict can occur between cooperating parties working towards similar objectives or between disputants aiming to achieve opposing objectives. Conflict can occur at many different levels between different sized groups and a wide variety of individuals. To put organisational conflict into context, the literature covering the broader concept of conflict levels will be considered.

2.4.1 Levels of Conflict

Wilmot and Hocker (1985) describe conflict as being the situation that arises when there is an interaction between interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and actions of interference in achieving those goals. This is the generally accepted definition of conflict, a situation which frequently exists between a wide variety of groups and individuals and which can be considered to be an inherent component of all social interactions (Pondy, 1989). Four levels of conflict are commonly identified (Lewicki, Saunders, Barry and Minton, 2003) as summarised in figure 2.4:

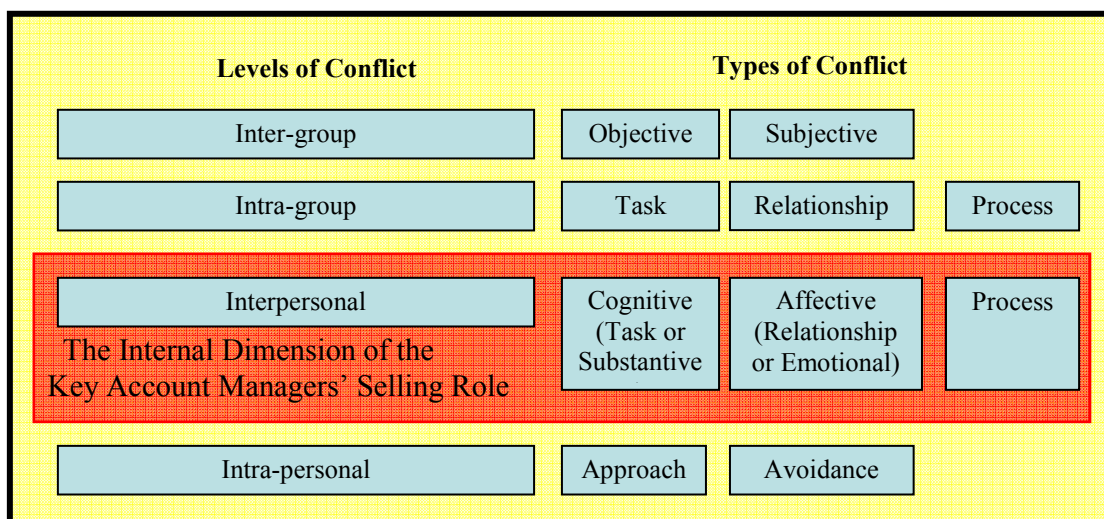


Figure 2.4 Levels and Types of Conflict

The diagram displays Lewicki *et al.*'s (2003) four levels of conflict and shows where the conflict experienced by the key account manager within the organisations is positioned. The four levels of conflict are:

1. *Inter-group conflict*, the conflict that arises between larger groups. Union disputes, international warring nations, government authorities, the commonly known perception of conflict which is highly complex due to the number of individuals involved.
2. *Intra-group conflict*, the conflict which occurs within a group or organisation, between groups within a group, teams or committees.
3. *Interpersonal conflict*, the conflict which exists between individuals or one individual and a group represented by another individual. Conflict between peers, bosses and subordinates, family members and individuals on a team.
4. The final level of conflict is *intrapersonal conflict*, the conflict occurring in one's own mind over ideas, decisions, emotions and values.

It is intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict, that is conflict within the organisation between one individual and another individual or group of individuals which is considered in the context of the key account manager's internal selling role – specifically the conflicts that the key account manager experiences when dealing with

other individuals or groups of individuals represented within their organisation while carrying out the internal selling role, as highlighted in figure 2.4.

Interpersonal conflict has been defined in a number of ways which can be summarised as the reaction an individual may have to the perception that the two parties have aspirations that cannot be achieved simultaneously (Putnem and Poole, 1987) or the process which begins when one individual or group feels negatively affected by another individual or group (Thomas, 1992) with these definitions being reliant upon the premise that an opposition or incompatibility is recognised by both parties (conflict is manifest), that an interaction is taking place and that there is some degree of interdependence.

Within groups or organisations, conflict may be related to competition over resources, power differentials, work or role ambiguity, negative interdependence between groups, tendencies to differentiate from the group and personal values and sensitivities (Deutsch, 1973; Greenberg and Baron, 1993; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005; Kolb and Putnam, 1992). Conflict in the organisational context, or intra-organisational conflict, refers to the situations which arise when two or more people working within the same organisation perceive differences in beliefs, values or goals which impact on their ability to work together and impedes their performance (Jameson, 1999). When occurring within teams or groups, this interpersonal conflict has been defined as an individual's perceptions of incompatibilities, differences in views or interpersonal incompatibility (Jehn, 1995). Due the perceptions of the individuals involved, this form of conflict is generally viewed as having negative consequences, being seen as highly adversarial (Ford and Walker, 1975) and can exist between two individuals or multi parties, and between an individual and another individual representing a group.

It is Thomas' (1992) simplified definition of interpersonal conflict that will be used when referring to intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict and the KAM selling role; i.e., the process which begins when an individual or group feels negatively affected by another individual or group. Here the conflict consists of a perception of barriers to achieving one's goals (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997; Thomas, 1992). For key account

managers, this can be any number of circumstances within the organisation which prevent them from meeting the customers' needs.

Research into intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict within management has covered three major areas, establishing a taxonomy of conflict with the organisation, the identification of conflict types (Jehn, 1995; Bradford *et al.*, 2004; Jameson, 1999), understanding the consequences of conflict (Jehn and Chatman, 2000; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999) and an evaluation of the behaviours used in the management of conflict together with the strategies which can be adopted during the conflict situation (Medina *et al.*, 2004; Amason, Hockwarter, Thompson and Harrison, 1995; Janssen, Van de Vliert and Veenstra, 1999). The first step in understanding the complexity of conflict is to summarise the types of conflict which can occur and their potential composition (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). First the literature covering the taxonomy of conflict will be reviewed.

2.4.2 A Taxonomy of Conflict

The broad area of interpersonal conflict has been further subdivided into two widely accepted types: *relationship* conflict and *task* conflict. Relationship conflict arises between the actors through their subjective emotional positions, whereas task conflict relates primarily to the more objective tasks or issues involved (Reid *et al.*, 2004). A series of studies confirmed this duality between relationship and task. As long ago as 1986, Wall and Nolan identified 'people oriented' versus 'task oriented' conflict. In the early to mid-1990's Priem and Price (1991), Pinkley and Northcraft (1994), Jehn (1995) and Sessa (1996) all identified 'relationship' and 'task' as discrete aspects of conflict. However, other streams of research in the late 1990s further complicated conflict typology by suggesting alternatives. Amason *et al.*, (1995) redefined conflict types as 'affective' and 'cognitive' (affective referring to relationships and cognitive to tasks) and in 1999 Van de Vliert *et al.*, further redefined these types as 'task' and 'person' conflict. Moreover, in working towards a more comprehensive model of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict, Jameson (1999) suggested three dimensions for conflict: content, relational and situational. The content dimension encompasses the

previously discussed conflict types (affective, cognitive, relationship etc) while the relational dimension considers the subjective, perceived variables within the relationships of the actors involved: trust, status, seriousness, degree of interdependence, record of success, and the number of actors involved. The situational dimension examines the variables which may be most relevant in selecting an appropriate conflict management strategy. These include time pressure, the potential impact of the conflict episode, the degree of escalation and the range of options available in the management of the conflict episode (Jameson, 1999).

Meanwhile, when reviewing the literature associated with conflict typology, Sheppard (1992) criticised the multiplicity of terms that were being used to describe types of interpersonal conflict, and the needless confusion that this caused. The result of the many approaches described above is that there is no general model for the typology of interpersonal conflict within the organisation. Therefore, in the absence of such a model, other researchers have taken different approaches to conflict typology, using the antecedents of the conflict episode to describe conflict types. Examples of this proliferation include role conflict (Walker and Churchill, 1975; Tidd and Friedman, 2002), gender conflict (Cheng, 1995) and goal conflict (Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002).

This proliferation of terms or typologies has unsurprisingly led to confusion, most noticeably with the term 'interpersonal conflict' being used to describe purely relationship or emotional conflict (Bradford *et al.*, 2004) or conflict being defined in terms of emotion only, adding to the wide range of terms already used (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). Thus, at a time when international, inter-organisational, intra-organisational, interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts are being extensively studied, conflict is being defined and operationalised in a variety of ways with no widely accepted and consistent model emerging (Reid *et al.*, 2004). Table 2.4 summarises the many different conflict typologies that have been proposed from Wall and Nolan (1986) to Guerra, Martinez, Munduate, and Medina (2005), and illustrates that relationship and task conflict are almost universally accepted as distinct types of interpersonal conflict by both psychology and management researchers.

| Date | Author(s) | Conflict Typology |
|------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1986 | Wall and Nolan | People Oriented, Task Oriented |
| 1991 | Priem and Price | Relationship, Task |
| 1994 | Pinkley and Northcraft | Relationship, Task |
| 1995 | Jehn | Relationship, Task |
| 1995 | Amason, <i>et al.</i> | Cognitive, Affective |
| 1996 | Sessa | Task, Person Oriented |
| 1996 | Amason | Affective, Cognitive |
| 1997 | Amason and Sapienza | Affective, Cognitive |
| 1999 | Jameson | Content, Relational, Situational |
| 1999 | Janssen, <i>et al.</i> | Task, Person Oriented |
| 2000 | Friedman, <i>et al.</i> | Relationship, Task |
| 2000 | Jehn and Chatman | Task, Relationship, Process |
| 2002 | Tellefsen and Eyuboglu | Goal Conflicts |
| 2004 | Bradford, <i>et al.</i> , | Interpersonal, Task |
| 2003 | De Dreu and Weingart | Relationship, Task |
| 2004 | Reid, <i>et al.</i> | Relationship, Task |
| 2004 | Tidd, <i>et al.</i> | Relationship, Task |
| 2004 | Medina, <i>et al.</i> , | Relationship, Task |
| 2005 | Guerra, <i>et al.</i> , | Relationship, Task |

Table 2.4 A Summary of the Conflict Typologies

Many researchers have identified a third type of conflict which relates to the environment in which managers operate being described as situational conflict (Jameson, 1999; Jehn, 1995, 1997b; Pinkley and Northcraft, 1994) or process conflict (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Since the terms ‘relationship’ and ‘task’ are open to misinterpretation, the terms *affective* and *cognitive* (following Amason (1996) and Amason and Sapienza, (1997)), in conjunction with *process* (Jehn, 1995), will be used in this thesis in the description of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts. These terms, which reflect the more specific terminology used in the psychology literature, are defined in Table 2.5.

| Conflict type | Definition |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Affective</i> | Conflicts concerned with what people think and feel about their relationships with other individuals or groups of individuals. |
| <i>Cognitive</i> | Conflicts concerned with what people know and understand about their task or objective |
| <i>Process</i> | Conflicts arising from the situational context of their role, the organisation structure, strategy or culture, the stage on which they operate |

Table 2.5 Definitions of Conflict Types: A Taxonomy of Conflict

Affective conflict is a term describing conflicts concerned with what people think and feel about their relationships including such dimensions as trust, status and degree of interdependence (Amason and Sapienza, 1997). Cognitive conflict describes conflicts concerned with what people know and understand about their task, roles and functions. Process conflict relates to conflicts arising from the situational context, the organisation structure, strategy or culture (Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Using this typology for conflict between individuals or groups of individuals within the organisation avoids confusion over the use of the terms ‘interpersonal’, ‘person’ or ‘relationship’ often used when referring to *affective* conflict, while task conflict is clearly distinguished from process conflict, addressing all the issues outlined in the previous section.

One remaining aspect of conflict typology which has been researched and needs to be covered is the notion of conflict composition. Jehn and Chatman (2000) suggest any conflict episode will have components of the different types; i.e., an episode of conflict within the organisation will have a cognitive, affective and process element and each conflict episode will be unique in its composition as presented in figure 2.5. Here there is a single conflict episode with a cognitive component, relating to the task associated with the conflict, an affective element relating to the emotions of the individuals involved and a process element which encompasses the context of the conflict

experienced. For a different conflict episode, the proportion of each of the elements may differ (Jehn and Chatman, 2000).

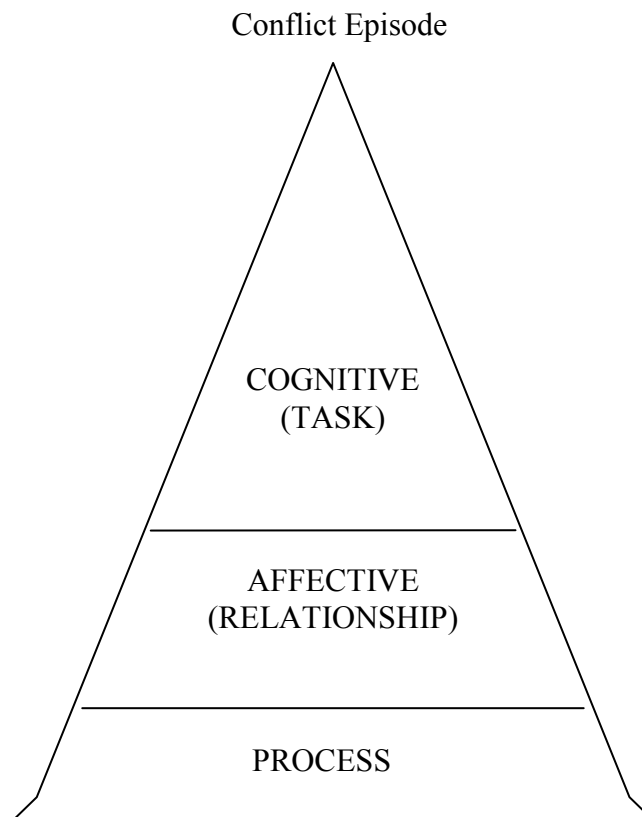


Figure 2.5 Diagrammatic Representation of Conflict Composition

While one stream of research focused on a taxonomy of the different types of conflict, another has focused on understanding the effects each type of conflict may have on individual and team performance; i.e., the consequences of conflict (Jehn, 1995; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999). Conflict within the organisation can have both functional and dysfunctional outcomes upon team and individual performance (Jehn, 1997a; Bradford *et al.*, 2004) and can be perceived and felt in different ways by the different actors experiencing the conflict episode (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Having presented a summary of the literature concerned with conflict taxonomy the review moves on to also consider the implications or consequences of organisational conflict, a

phenomenon which although primarily viewed negatively can have positive consequences (De Dreu, 1997).

2.4.3 Consequences of Conflict

Classical management theorists have taken the view that conflict exists in opposition to cooperation – that it is wholly dysfunctional with the focus being on resolution rather than management (Pondy, 1967). When defining conflict as the process which begins when one person or group feels negatively affected by another, there is the implication that there are obstructions to one party achieving their goals that can therefore easily be interpreted negatively. This can lead to the desire for individuals to avoid conflict episodes rather than focus on managing the situation with this avoidance or suppression of conflict leading to perceived negative consequences on team or individual performance (De Dreu, 1997; Jehn and Chatman, 2000; Ohbuchi and Suzuki, 2003). As a result these negatively perceived conflict episodes can increase tension and antagonism between team members and lead to the team not focusing on the required task (Saavedra, Earley and Van Dyne, 1993; Wall and Nolan, 1986; Deutsch, 1973). This avoidance and suppression can also have long term negative consequences such as stifling creativity and escalating and promoting groupthink. Moreover, where the degree of interdependence is negative; i.e., where one party wins at the expense of the other, then the conflict will be viewed more negatively (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). Furthermore, affective conflict, where the conflict is more personal, leading to personality clashes, increased stress and frustration, again has a much more negative perception and outcome in terms of relationship quality and performance. Affective conflict impedes the decision making process as individuals focus on the personal aspects rather than the task related issues (Jehn, 1995).

In contrast to the negative view, more recent conflict management theory suggests conflict can also have a positive or functional effect upon relationships and the best route to this outcome is through effective management and stimulation rather than avoidance or suppression (Denton 1988; De Dreu, 1997; Hatch, 1997; De Dreu and Beesma, 2005). When individuals are in conflict they have to deal with issues, be more

creative and see different aspects to a possible solution which in turn leads to the mitigation of consensus and groupthink. Jehn (1995) has suggested that cognitive, issue-based conflict can have a positive effect on team performance. Groups who experience cognitive conflict have a greater understanding of the objectives and assignments at hand which enables them to make better decisions when dealing with issues as they arise (Simons and Peterson, 2000; Guerra *et al.*, 2005). Research has also shown that when individuals are exposed to a 'devil's advocate', (an individual stimulating conflict through disagreement) they are able to make better judgments than those not exposed (Schwenk, 1990) again suggesting the potential positive consequences of cognitive conflict. In addition Schultz-Hardt, Jochims and Frey (2002) suggested that groups made better decisions where they started in disagreement rather than agreement. Where there is high positive interdependence; i.e., an agreeable outcome for both parties, the conflict episode will be viewed much more positively (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). With the acceptance that suppressing and avoiding conflict reduces individual or team performance and that stimulating conflict increases performance comes the suggestion that there must be an optimum level of conflict, too little conflict being as dysfunctional as is too much (Walton, 1969).

2.4.4 Summary

Conflict exists at many levels throughout social interactions with intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict being the main concern of key account managers as they carry out their internal selling duties (Lewicki, Weiss and Lewin, 1992; Lewicki and Spencer, 1992). Different conflicts within the organisation can exhibit different and unique proportions of the different conflict types and can have both a positive and negative impact on those involved (Jehn and Chatman, 2000; De Dreu, 1997). With the positive view of conflict and the recognition that there needs to be a certain degree of conflict to stimulate the best performance, it is vital that the nature of any conflict is fully understood and managed effectively. Further research by Jehn and Chatman (2000) suggests that the effects of conflict are much more complicated than just one type of conflict influencing the potential outcomes. Both affective and cognitive conflict can have negative effects and since the composition of different conflict episodes may be

unique; i.e., the proportion of different conflict types making up the conflict episode, it is suggested that it is the strategies chosen to deal with the conflict which are more likely to determine the outcome (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999). Conflict management behavioural strategies are covered in the next section of the literature review.

2.5 CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Conflict management can be defined as the actions in which a person typically engages, in response to perceived interpersonal conflict, in order to achieve a desired goal (Thomas, 1976). Demonstrably, conflict management pays off; previous research has indicated that it is the way in which conflict episodes are addressed which determines the outcome (Amason, 1996; Phillips and Cheston, 1979). However, there is disagreement between researchers about the degree to which managers can and do adopt different conflict management behaviours. Previous research has considered three different approaches: the ‘one best way’ perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984) the contingency or situational perspective (Thomas, 1992; Munduate *et al.*, 1999; Nicotera, 1993) and the complexity or conglomerated perspective (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999; Euwema *et al.*, 2003). Each will now be considered in turn.

2.5.1 Conflict Management Behaviours

The ‘One Best Way’ Perspective

Arguably the simplest perspective on conflict management behaviour is the ‘one best way’ perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984), which argues that one conflict management style or behaviour is more effective than another. Moreover, it argues that individuals have a particular preferred behavioural predisposition to the way in which they handle conflict (Sternberg and Dobson, 1987). Thus, from the ‘one best way’ perspective, the conflict-avoiding manager will always prefer avoidance strategies, whereas the accommodating manager will always prefer accommodating solutions. In adopting this approach, the most constructive solution is considered to be collaboration, since collaboration is always positively interdependent – it has a joint best outcome,

often described as ‘win/win’ (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). In addition, the ‘one best way’ approach suggests that a more aggressive, competitive, negatively interdependent approach (in fact, any conflict management approach other than collaboration) results in suboptimal outcomes (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). However, the ‘one best way’ perspective raises more questions than it answers. It does not explain how managers are able to collaborate if they have a different behavioural predisposition, nor does it provide evidence that collaboration always produces the best outcome (Thomas, 1992; Brown, 1992). A more general problem with the ‘one best way’ approach is that it is not very useful; if managers have little or no control over their approach to conflict management, the practical applications are limited (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). Therefore the individual circumstances surrounding any conflict episode need to be considered in order to address these limitations.

The Contingency Perspective

Moving beyond the ‘one best way’ perspective, in which collaborative behaviours are considered to provide the most desired outcome, the contingency perspective maintains that the optimal conflict management behaviour depends on the specific conflict situation, and that what is appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another (Thomas, 1992; Brown, 1992). Here the best approach is dependent upon a particular set of circumstances. The implications are directly opposite to those of the ‘one best way’ perspective, suggesting that individuals should select the conflict management behaviour that is most likely to produce the desired outcome. Thus, conflict management behaviours are regarded as a matter of choice (rather than innate predispositions, as in the ‘one best way’ view), and the outcome is dependent on the selection of the most appropriate mode of conflict management behaviour to suit the situation.

Until recently, conflict research has been heavily influenced by the ‘one best way’ and contingency perspectives, focusing on the effectiveness of any one single mode of conflict management behaviour (primarily collaboration) during a single conflict episode (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). However, neither approach makes allowance for

the passage of time, for changes occurring within a micro environment during any interaction, of multiple conflict episodes occurring simultaneously, or of changing behaviour during an interaction based on perceptions of the outcome if a particular behaviour is adopted. The 'one best way' and contingency perspectives do not offer a real-world view in which managers both can and do change their behaviours, perhaps trying different approaches to break a deadlock or to improve their bargaining position, taking into account changing circumstances in the micro environment and the subsequent influence upon the actions of individuals involved in any conflict episode (Olekalns, Smith and Walsh, 1996; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). In order to cover these issues a more complex view of conflict management behaviour is required.

The Complexity Perspectives

An approach which deals with the varied conditions that could influence a conflict management strategy is provided by the complexity perspective, which characterises conflicts as being dynamic and multi-dimensional. In such circumstances, the best behavioural style in dealing with any one conflict episode may vary during, or between, conflict episodes (Medina *et al.*, 2004; Nicotera, 1993; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). For conflict in a complex world, neither the 'one best way' nor the contingency perspective would necessarily produce optimal results. If conflict does not occur discretely and individually (Pondy, 1989), existing approaches may not describe the world as managers actually experience it. In fact, these approaches have artificially limited conflict research to a flat, two-dimensional model.

Recent work by Van de Vliert *et al.*, (1997) and Medina *et al.*, (2004) has expanded current theory through consideration of the complexity perspective of conflict management. The complexity perspective argues that any reaction to a conflict episode consists of multiple behavioural components rather than one single conflict management behaviour. In the complexity perspective, using a mixture of accommodating, avoiding, competing, compromising and collaborating behaviours throughout the conflict episode is considered to be the rule rather than the exception (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). To address the shortcomings of traditional research and to

incorporate the complexity perspective into conflict management theory, we need to move beyond two dimensions.

2.5.2 Beyond Two Dimensions

To date, studies taking a complexity approach to conflict management have adopted one of three different complexity perspectives. The first examines simultaneous complexity and how different combinations of behaviours affect the outcome of the conflict (Munduate *et al.*, 1999). The second complexity approach, temporal complexity, focuses on the point of behavioural change and the outcome. Examining either the behavioural phases through which the participants of a conflict episode pass or looking at the point at which behavioural style changes and the effect this has on the conflict episode (Olekalns *et al.*, 1996). The third approach is the sequential complexity or conglomerated perspective, which is concerned with the different modes of conflict management behaviour, how they are combined, at what point they change during the interaction and how this influences the outcome (Medina *et al.*, 2004).

The application of complexity theory to conflict management research has revealed that there are more than the traditional five behaviours that managers use to manage conflict. In their study of conglomerated conflict management behaviour, Euwema *et al.*, (2003) argued that the traditional approach under-represents the individual's assertive modes of behaviour and have as a result added 'confronting' and 'process controlling', making seven possible behaviours. Weingart, Thompson, Bazerman and Carroll (1990) identified two types of sequential pattern: Reciprocity, responding to the other party with the same behaviour; and Complementarity, responding with an opposing behaviour (Diekmann, 2004). Applying a complexity perspective, the effectiveness of complementarity or reciprocity behaviours will be contingent upon the situation, the micro environment, the number of conflict episodes and types of conflict present (Curseu, Kenis and Raab, 2006). The sequential pattern may in itself be complex, being both dependent upon the current situation and on the varying behaviours throughout the interaction (Janssen *et al.*, 1999).

As previously discussed a further, often unrecognised implication of complexity in conflict is that each conflict episode could be unique, being composed of different proportions of each of the affective, cognitive and process conflict types (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Considering this, the complexity perspective now also has to view conflict as dynamic and changing over time, with each conflict episode having a unique composition requiring a specific approach in order to obtain the best possible outcome.

2.5.3 Summary

Conflict within the organisation is complex and has been defined in many different ways with a wide variety of conflict types emerging from different research streams (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). For the purpose of this research the terms *affective*, *cognitive* and *process* will be used when dealing with conflict types at the interpersonal level. In using this terminology the types of conflict are split clearly into: conflicts concerned with what people think and feel about their relationships; trust, status and degree of interdependence; conflicts concerned with what people know and understand about their task, roles and functions; and finally what the situational context is; i.e., the organisation structure, strategy and culture. Using this typology for conflict between individuals within the organisation avoids any confusion over the use of the term interpersonal when referring to relationship conflict, while task conflict is clearly distinguished from process conflict. In addition this research will consider any one conflict episode as potentially being composed of more than one conflict type (Jehn, 1997a); i.e., that conflict episodes do not occur in isolation and that any conflict episode can have both functional and dysfunctional outcomes. The next generation of research needs to extend this theory and recognise that an equally complex and continually changing set of conflict management behaviours may be required in their management (Medina *et al.*, 2004).

Traditionally researchers have taken Thomas's (1976) five conflict management behaviours and used the dual concern theory approach, concern for self and others' goals, as the basis for the choice of conflict management style (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Thomas, 1992). This does not consider the relationship between the components

of conflict and the complex behaviours which are adopted in managing the conflict, which are interrelated and can be altered during the interaction based upon any new information perceived during the interaction (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). With little managerial research into conflict management taking a complexity perspective and no research applying the theory to the internal sales role, there is an opportunity to expand the understanding of conflict within the organisation and the behaviours used to manage it (Medina *et al.*, 2004).

2.6 THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The implications of the findings from the literature review for both key account management and conflict management theory are twofold: first, the behavioural strategies adopted in the management of these conflicts will be highly complex and will be determined by a number of influencing factors; and second, this moves theory beyond the two-dimensional dual concern perspective, in that the adaptable key account manager when dealing with these multiple, simultaneous conflicts will also need to consider the possible implications of the chosen strategy, along with the changing micro environment in which they operate, on their relationships together with the potential consequences.

To date there has been little empirical research into the degree to which key account managers are able to adapt their behaviour during internal interactions while in the boundary spanning position carrying out their internal selling duties (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007). Moreover, the value of the complexity perspective in dealing with multiple, simultaneous complex organisational conflict has not been empirically examined (Medina *et al.*, 2004). Therefore this research explores conflict through Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint and expands on the theoretical findings upon which the literature review has shed light by investigating intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict, adaptiveness and the key account manager's internal selling role (Vink and Verbeke, 1993). In order to guide the research and provide a clear visual representation of the phenomenon under investigation, a conceptual model together with a research agenda framing the research objectives is presented.

2.6.1 A Conceptual Visualisation and Research Guide

This conceptual (model) visualisation (figure 2.6) of conflict within the organisation provides a three-dimensional representation of conflict taking Pondy's (1989) view of conflict as constant and an inherent component of organisational life. It shows how, at any one given point in time (the X axis), there can be a number of conflict episodes experienced (A to D), each with a different intensity (the Z axis) and duration (X axis). In addition, following Jehn and Chatman (2000) each conflict episode will have a unique composition, being made up of different proportions of cognitive, affective and process elements.

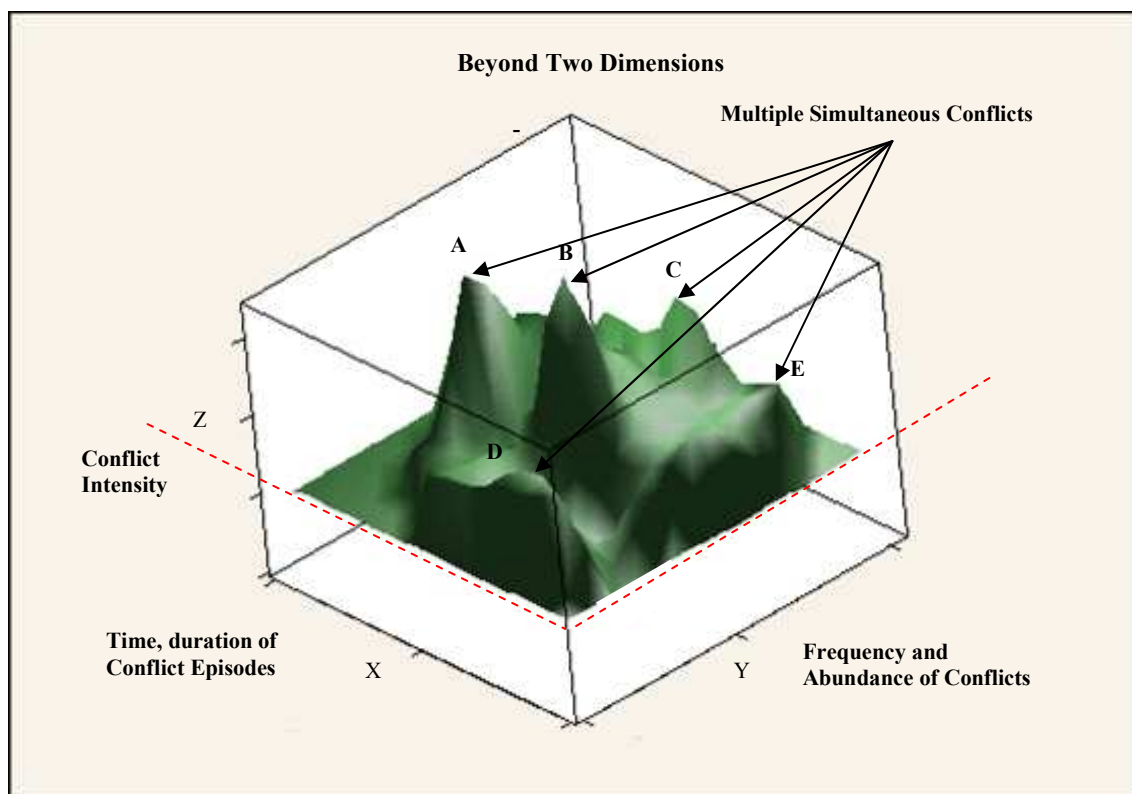


Figure 2.6 Conceptual Visualisation of the Themes Under Investigation

If conflict episodes do not occur in isolation, and any one best way for managing that conflict may not always have a positive outcome, then it is vital for organisations to

understand which behaviours or combination will gain the maximum positive impact. In contrast to existing research into personal selling which looks at the salespersons' external relationships and related selling skills, this research focuses on internal relationships, the key account management boundary spanning position and the inside selling role, specifically on how conflict is perceived and managed. Therefore the question this literature review leads to and research thesis subsequently presents is:

“How do key account managers perceive and manage interpersonal conflicts within their organisation?”

In answering this question three themes will be investigated each with key issues raised by the research question being addressed:

1. An investigation into the key account managers' perception of conflict within the organisation, the nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict.

Conflict episodes are complex, having differing compositions of affective, cognitive and process elements which change over time. Exploring this theme will develop an understanding of conflict from the key account management perspective, what conflict looks and feels like, building a foundation for the remaining themes.

2. Investigating the key account manager's perception of which behaviours are most effective in the resolution of conflict episodes.

The complexity perspective recognises that different conflict situations call for different management behaviours (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). This implies that managers can call upon a much wider range of approaches to conflict management than previously thought. Moreover there is a further implication, which is that managers are able to adapt their behaviour during conflict episodes (Medina *et al.*, 2004). Therefore in exploring the behaviours key account managers adopt in the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict this theme investigates the different behaviours

used to manage multiple conflicts at any one time together with any changes behaviour during and across conflict episodes.

A substantial branch of recent conflict management research has focused on the outcomes of conflict and has suggested that not all conflict has negative consequences (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997; Simons and Peterson, 2000; Schultz and Evans, 2002; Schwenk 1990). Given this, the effect that the behaviour adopted has on the conflict experienced, mitigating or agitating the situation, needs to be explored and the effects this may have on any subsequent conflict episodes (Amason, 1996). Re-visiting Pondy's (1989) alternative view and incorporating the additional perspectives that come from consideration of conflict outcomes and the application of the complexity perspective, this research will also explore the effectiveness of the behavioural choices through the description of both successful and unsuccessful management of conflict incidents

3. An understanding of the abundance and frequency of occurrence of the conflict episodes as encountered by key account managers within their organisations.

Finally, taking the complexity perspective one step further and adopting Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint for conflict within the organisation, this research will investigate the abundance of conflict within the organisation as experienced by the key account managers involved, together with the frequency of incidents experienced. Pondy (1989) argues that, rather than a sequence of discrete isolated incidents, conflict is an inherent condition of social interaction within the organisation and that conflict episodes may occur simultaneously not sequentially. This research will therefore also investigate the suggestion that conflict is a constant and inherent condition of the key account manager's intra-organisational, interpersonal relationships, and that multiple conflict episodes may occur simultaneously. In addition, this research also explores the duration and intensity of the conflicts the key account manager experiences completing the conceptual visualisation of conflict within the organisation.

The purpose of setting out this new conceptual model for conflict management research in the KAM context together with a set of detailed research themes is to move beyond

two dimensions and consider conflict as an inherent component of organisational life, with multiple, simultaneous incidents requiring a complex set of behaviours which may change during and across any number of different circumstances. In doing so this research will also examine the effectiveness of the complexity perspective exploring an alternative research paradigm which considers conflict to be constant and inherent rather than a series discrete isolated incidents in an otherwise cooperative world (Pondy, 1989).

2.7 SUMMARY

In personal selling buyer / seller dyadic relationships, behaviour changing leads to the development of the adaptive selling theory detailing the altering of sales behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation (Weitz *et al.*, 1986). This adaptive selling theory could provide new insights into complex conflict management within the organisation building upon the theories emerging from the psychology literature.

Organisational conflict is complex and multi-dimensional with many of the components being interrelated with the classical view of organisational conflict describing conflict as discrete isolated occurrences in an otherwise cooperative organisation. However, this is now being challenged, suggesting that conflict is an inherent component of the organisation with a wide variety of potential outcomes (Pondy, 1966; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). Although conflict by definition arises from the perceived negative influences of one party upon another, conflict can have a positive influence within the organisation (Jehn, 1995). Therefore if conflict can be productive and is a constant, inherent component of organisational life, then it is vital that conflict and its management are fully understood in order to maximise the potential for a positive outcome.

Blake and Mouton's (1964, 1970) two-dimensional model has been widely used by conflict management theorists citing the framework as the basis for their own research. As a result, researchers have developed a number of taxonomies and definitions of

conflict based on the original two-dimensional models as discussed earlier. The multiple typologies in use have been argued to be problematic (Nicotera, 1993; Sheppard, 1992) although it is recognised that all the types have research value. However, the complexity of multiple dimensions to intra-organisational conflict has made the application of these models less practical. Sheppard (1992) suggested that there needs to be a generally accepted and consistent typology used in order to avoid confusion over the many terms currently used. Moreover research by Jehn and Chatman (2000) suggests any conflict episode will have a unique composition of the different types of conflict as perceived by the actors involved. These types are components of a conflict episode and take into consideration the new view of conflict being inherent within the organisation and not occurring in isolation, and that any individual within the organisation could be handling any number of conflicts at any one time.

With research considering conflict episodes in isolation, conflict management research into the behaviours adopted to handle conflict has considered the outcomes related to any one behaviour in relation to any one conflict type (Bradford, 1999). The literature suggests that there is a range of conflict management behaviours which can be consistent across all conflict episodes or adapted to specific conflict episodes (Medina *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, the literature suggests conflict has many components which will be unique to the situation, that multiple conflict episodes may occur simultaneously and that individuals are able to adapt their behaviour throughout conflict episodes, dependent upon the situation, in order to consistently attempt to achieve the best possible outcome (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999; Janssen *et al.*, 1999).

In order to progress beyond the two-dimensional approach, this research considers all of the conflict types and the influence they have on the behaviours adopted by the actors involved. This research establishes that multiple conflict episodes with multiple components occur simultaneously and thus supports Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint of constant inherent organisational conflict.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY – RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND DESIGN

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the research philosophy, strategy and design providing a rationale for taking a qualitative, interpretivist methodological approach. This chapter will also present the details of the data collection method and analysis techniques used.

Due to the limited availability of empirical research focusing on the internal selling role (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007), in particular this aspect of the key account management function, there is a need for exploratory research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the intra-organisational dimension of the selling role. In addition, regarding conflict, although the business and psychology literature is extensive, covering both the nature of conflict and the management strategies used, there has been very little empirical research in either field exploring conflict from the alternative paradigm of being an inherent condition of social interaction within the organisation (Pondy, 1989; Medina *et al.*, 2004; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). This further supports the argument for an investigative approach.

Through the study of the complex conflict management behavioural sequences adopted by key account managers within their organisations, this research aims to answer the question of how key account management salespeople perceive and manage intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict episodes. In doing so, this research further explores one aspect of personal selling which, although it has been identified, has not been fully investigated: the internal selling role (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007). Moreover this research adds a new dimension by specifically exploring the perceived nature of conflict within the organisation from a key account management perspective and how this conflict is managed; i.e., the intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts which key account managers encounter while trying to meet both their own organisation's needs and those of their customers. This research uses the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) as its methodological approach through a series of semi structured CIT interviews with key account managers from seven participating organisations.

The exploratory nature of this research is inductive in its design meaning that its success is dependent upon gaining a deeper understanding of the key account manager's internal selling role; specifically, how intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict is perceived and managed. Moreover, the development of ideas and constructs flows from the research data as opposed to data being used to support any prior theoretical models and hypotheses. Therefore this research takes a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, the assumptions of the grounded theory method are not intrinsic in this research; rather, the approach is used to uncover any emergent theory. In line with the inductive approach and the use of grounded theory the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was considered to be most appropriate, allowing the researcher to get as close to the incidents of conflict within the organisation as possible. An inductive research strategy takes an interpretivist approach and uses an interpretive framework for the data analysis (Spiggle, 1994). This approach provides a structured, staged framework for the analysis of the data allowing the researcher both to move beyond simple coding and to examine the relationships between emerging themes across multiple sets of data. The whole process therefore allows theory to emerge from the data rather than work-testing existing hypotheses which has been so dominant in the field. The study is exploratory in nature and seeks to better understand the perception and management of conflict within the organisation from the key account management perspective.

This chapter is split into three main sections: Firstly a discussion of the research philosophy, the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research, making the case for qualitative, interpretive research. The second section considers the research methodology and how the research strategy fits with the philosophical assumptions. The third section considers the data collection methods and analysis tools used. Also included in the methodology section is the sample rationale and critical incident technique protocols which are essential in following Flanagan's (1954) method, with the interview technique and protocols summarised in appendix A-1.

3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND DESIGN

This section explores the philosophical position of the research, addressing the ontological and epistemological foundations upon which this research is built. Three aspects need to be taken into consideration when describing philosophical assumptions in the social sciences: ontology (the way in which social reality is viewed); epistemology (the way in which knowledge gained); and research methodology (the data collection and analysis methods) (Blaikie, 1993). The philosophy of the research needs to be clearly set out in order to inform the research design, how the data will be collected, analysed and knowledge gained. Therefore this section sets out the philosophical position of the researcher, the ontological and epistemological assumptions which underpin this research (see table 3.1), and demonstrates how the ontological and epistemological considerations have informed the selection of the research methods. Next, the case for a critical realist approach and interpretive qualitative research is put forward.

3.2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Perspective

This research adopts a certain ontological and epistemological perspective about the nature of the social world, how this might be investigated and knowledge gained. The assumptions made concern the nature or essence of the social phenomenon under investigation and how knowledge of this will be communicated. Therefore any philosophical assumptions and beliefs made when developing the research maintain a constant philosophical position (Blaikie, 1993; Easterby-Smith, 2002). The philosophical approaches and assumptions are considered in the following section.

First, consideration will be given to ontology, which is what there is to know about. the study of being or existence (Blaikie, 1993). It describes the basic categories and relationships of being and can be said to be the study of conceptions of reality, the approach of the social enquiry. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality; even, at its extremes, whether reality is external and objective, whether reality exists which is independent of the observers or subjective constructed within an individual's mind

(Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Therefore, put simply, ontology is the view of social reality taken by the researcher. This can range from positivism to social constructivism with realism taking the middle ground.

Positivism has an emphasis on the objective measurement of facts which can in turn allow for the testing of general laws of hypotheses, adopting the philosophical perspective of the natural scientist. This is a philosophical position where the researcher is independent of what is being studied and where the methodological decisions on how to carry out the research are determined by a set of objective criteria (Easterby-Smith, 2002). Positivism has strong links with quantitative research methods where theory is tested based upon the hypotheses developed prior to the data collection.

Social Constructivism, considered to be at the opposing pole from positivism, has an emphasis on subjective experiences upon which the participants of the research interpret their reality, a reality which is socially constructed (Easterby-Smith, 2002). Social construction has strong links with qualitative research where theory is built through interpretation of the data collected.

Realism sits between the two poles of positivism and interpretivism. Realists consider the interpretive view of social reality but also argue that in the social sciences some of the principles of the natural sciences need to be adopted, that an objective reality exists which may be interpreted in different ways by the actors involved, and that society exists because of the members involved and because of what the members do, and so is both a condition and an outcome of their activity (Blaikie, 1993).

"Realism is the doctrine that an external world exists independently of our representations of it. Representations include perceptions, thoughts, language, beliefs and desires, as well as artefacts such as pictures and maps, and so include all the ways in which we could or do know and experience the world and ourselves. Relativism repudiates this doctrine, arguing that since any such external world

is inaccessible to us in both principle and practice, it need not be postulated or considered." (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p. 6).

Critical Realism assumes that a reality exists which is independent of our perception of it and acknowledges that our view of reality is influenced by a wide variety of subjective influences (Bhaskar, 1979). More specifically, transcendental or critical realism maintains that there exists an objectively knowable, mind-independent reality, whilst acknowledging the roles of perception and individual thought processes (Bhaskar 1979). This philosophical perspective makes the ontological assumption that reality is to some extent socially constructed where the actors involved construct their own reality based upon their interpretation of what is experienced in the world. Having considered the ontological assumptions, it is the assumptions associated with critical realism which underpin this research, in that this research will focus on the key account managers' perceptions of conflict within the organisation where the conflict itself becomes the objective reality upon which they build their own perceptions.

Having reviewed these ontological assumptions, the second consideration is that of epistemology; what is it possible to know about something, and the assumptions made about the way in which knowledge of social reality is gained (Blaikie, 1993). Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and belief; i.e., how knowledge is created. There are a number of epistemological approaches, each emphasising a particular ontological position. Thus, objective, positive ontology has an epistemology following deductivism where hypotheses are conformed or rejected with theory preceding data, lending itself to quantitative research methods. Alternatively at the other extreme, the social constructionist ontology is associated with inductivism where theory follows data, making inferences from observations and lending itself to qualitative research methods. (Morgan and Smircich 1980)). Between the extreme philosophical domains outlined lie many alternatives, all of which bear some relationship to the dominant philosophies. Having an understanding of the philosophical alternatives is critical for the researcher in order to make ontological and epistemological choices which will be appropriate for the research methods undertaken.

It is therefore vital that the researcher's preferences are made clear in the chosen research philosophy.

3.2.2 The Chosen Research Philosophy

Considering the ontological paradigms, the researcher's own philosophical position and the predominant positivist, deductive approaches of previous sales research, this research adopts the ontological paradigm of transcendental or critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

| ASSUMPTIONS | RESEARCH PARADIGM |
|---------------------|--|
| Ontology | <i>Transcendental / Critical Realism</i> , suggesting a social science position which aims to identify the processes which create social events, understanding that human agency is made possible by social interactions and structures that are themselves contingent upon certain external conditions. (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Bhaskar, 1979). |
| Human Nature | <i>Information Processing</i> , the actors involved can adapt and change through reflection on the factors upon which their actions are contingent (Bhaskar, 1979; Morgan and Smircich, 1980). |
| Epistemology | <i>Interpretivist</i> , reality as a contextual field of information. The key account managers' accounts of handling conflict within their organisation are interpreted from the transcribed data with theory flowing directly from the data (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). |

Table 3.1 Summary of Philosophical Assumptions Underpinning this Thesis

This philosophical perspective fits well with the researcher's intention to obtain the key account managers' perceptions of conflict within the organisation and a research design based upon the analysis of retrospective recollections of real events as experienced by the key account managers involved. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher subsequently adopts an interpretivist epistemology in order to investigate the key account managers' perceptions of actual conflict situations as described by the key account managers involved, making sense of interview data with theory following data rather than hypothesis testing. The philosophical assumptions are summarised in table 3.1.

3.2.3 The Case for a Qualitative, Interpretivist Approach

As highlighted earlier, previous research strategy into personal selling and conflict has reflected the principles of positivism, taking a deductive approach using survey techniques to test theoretical hypotheses. This positivist, deductive approach assumes an external reality from the actors involved, with the emphasis being on objective measurement and theory testing. Moreover, this line of scientific enquiry seems to be the preferred research strategy in North America where the majority of personal selling studies have been carried out. In contrast, to explore the key account managers' internal selling role and gain further appreciation of intra-organisational conflict and its management, an inductive, interpretivist approach is called for. This follows the belief that a reality exists which is independent of the actors involved, where the theoretical explanations have some correspondence with what the key account manager perceives to have actually taken place. In taking this approach the researcher is able to capture the complexities of the key account management selling role within seven high performing organisations where the key account managers themselves use their skills and experience in handling a wide variety of conflict situations. This approach serves as a more holistic role analysis procedure which focuses on specific conflict situations as described by the key account managers involved. Therefore this research was able to investigate first hand how key account management salespeople perceive and manage conflict incidents within their organisations.

It follows that in taking this position, the researcher maintains that there is a mind-independent reality which can be objectively investigated whilst acknowledging thought processes and perceptions of the key account managers involved. Moreover, through careful consideration of the literature and the range of empirical studies carried out into the nature and management of conflict within the organisation and considering the new domain of this research, within the sales context, a qualitative approach in the research strategy was taken, consistent with:

- a. The ontological and epistemological assumptions
- b. The research question being asked
- c. The exploratory nature of the research
- d. The complexity of the behaviours being investigated
- e. The requirement to move beyond the traditional view, the role of theory

The inductive, interpretive approach takes into account the perceptions of the actors involved and reflects the philosophical assumptions of the researcher. The next step is to determine the appropriate methods of data collection and analysis which will continue to reflect this position.

3.2.4 The Case for a Grounded Approach Using the Critical Incident Technique

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory for organisational research to aid researchers and move away from deductive, hypothesis testing toward new theory development, which they felt was missing in the field (Pettigrew, 2000). Subsequent researchers have developed a grounded approach, which is influenced by some of the practices of grounded theory whilst differing in some essential aspects (Heath and Cowley, 2003; Hunter, Hari, Egbu and Kelly, 2005). This research takes a grounded approach. The grounded approach taken here is distinguished from grounded theory as follows. Traditional grounded theory views reality as being socially constructed, accepting the complex nature of organisational life (Glaser, 1992; Heath and Cowley, 2003) whereas this research takes an interpretivist approach adopted for the understanding of reality from the key account managers' perspective. Moreover, Glaser

(1992) proposes that limited prior knowledge of the research area is important to prevent contamination of the data with any researcher preconceptions (Pettigrew, 2000); however this research recognises the researcher's prior knowledge of the industry and the key account management selling role, which would inevitably conflict with Glaser's demand for an entirely impartial grounded theory design. In fact, the argument over the importance of prior knowledge has been one of the major splits between the founders of grounded theory research. Glaser (1992) strictly defends the importance of avoiding contamination with prior knowledge, whereas Strauss suggests that some researcher knowledge from experience or depth of reading before data collection in the field is beneficial to theory development and unavoidable (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Heath and Cowley, 2003; Hunter et al, 2005). Here, the researcher's prior knowledge and experience proved to be essential both in gaining access to the key account managers involved, while knowledge of 'their world' proved to be vital in the data collection and analysis. For this reason, complete detachment from the possible influencing factors of prior knowledge is taken into account, seen as inimical to a true grounded theory approach but not considered to be an obstacle for the inductive design of this research. Moreover, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), theory denotes a set of well-developed categories, themes or concepts which are systematically interrelated through statements of relationships which in turn form the basis of a theoretical framework explaining the phenomenon under investigation. Heath and Cowley (2003) described the differences between the Glaserian and Straussian approaches noting that Strauss's (1990) approach incorporates specific analytical techniques having a different focus on the induction and deduction processes.

That said, the organised form of data collection and analysis in this research is heavily influenced by grounded theory. In line with the researcher's ontological and epistemological position this research takes a 'grounded approach' which is ethnographic in design and guided by the grounded theory method as originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Although the principles of grounded theory form the basis of the methods used to uncover the emergent theories, the assumptions of the grounded theory design are not inherent in this research. In this research a grounded approach is taken where theory is grounded in the key account managers' accounts of

actual occurrences of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict situations and is closely related to the realities of modern key account management daily routines and their internal selling role. To achieve this inductive approach it was important that the general design of the research had no prior hypotheses. The grounded approach consists of systematic data collection and analysis in order to construct theory which is grounded in the data itself (Charmaz, 2006). This is consistent with and follows grounded theory where the aim is to enter into a reality with few or no preconceptions or hypotheses and allow emergent themes in the research to shape the development of theory through a series of coding and reflection stages (Spiggle, 1994; Hunter et al, 2003).

In taking this grounded approach the method fits closely to the later procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) where the data analysis is bound by the preconceived themes under investigation as identified through the literature review (Charmaz, 2006, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). Furthermore, this approach fits with the CIT as the data collection method which elicits rich accounts of the key account managers' experiences when dealing with conflict in the organisation.

The critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) was identified as a professional role analysis tool designed to capture rich descriptions of workplace situations as perceived by those involved. It captures the individuals' own interpretations of their work situation and settings with descriptive details being collected which relate to real-life situations (Stitt-Gohdes, Lambrecht and Redmann, 2000). CIT is a well-established method with over 140 studies using the critical incident technique published in the marketing literature alone (Gremler, 2003). Moreover, it has previously been used in the study of interpersonal conflict resolution (McGrane, Wilson and Cammock, 2005) and in the study of disputes resolution (Metts, Sprecher and Cupach, 1991). Talarico (2002) also takes a similar interpretive approach in exploring coaching and management. Given the exploratory nature of this method into specific incidents within the organisation, it is ideally suited to the study of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts in the key account management context. Using this method to explore salesperson behaviour within the organisation will make a methodological contribution to this domain and help develop our understanding of key account management behaviour in specific

circumstances. A model representing the research philosophy and design is presented in figure 3.1. The next section will examine CIT in detail and how it could be applied to an investigation of conflict and the key account managers' internal selling role.

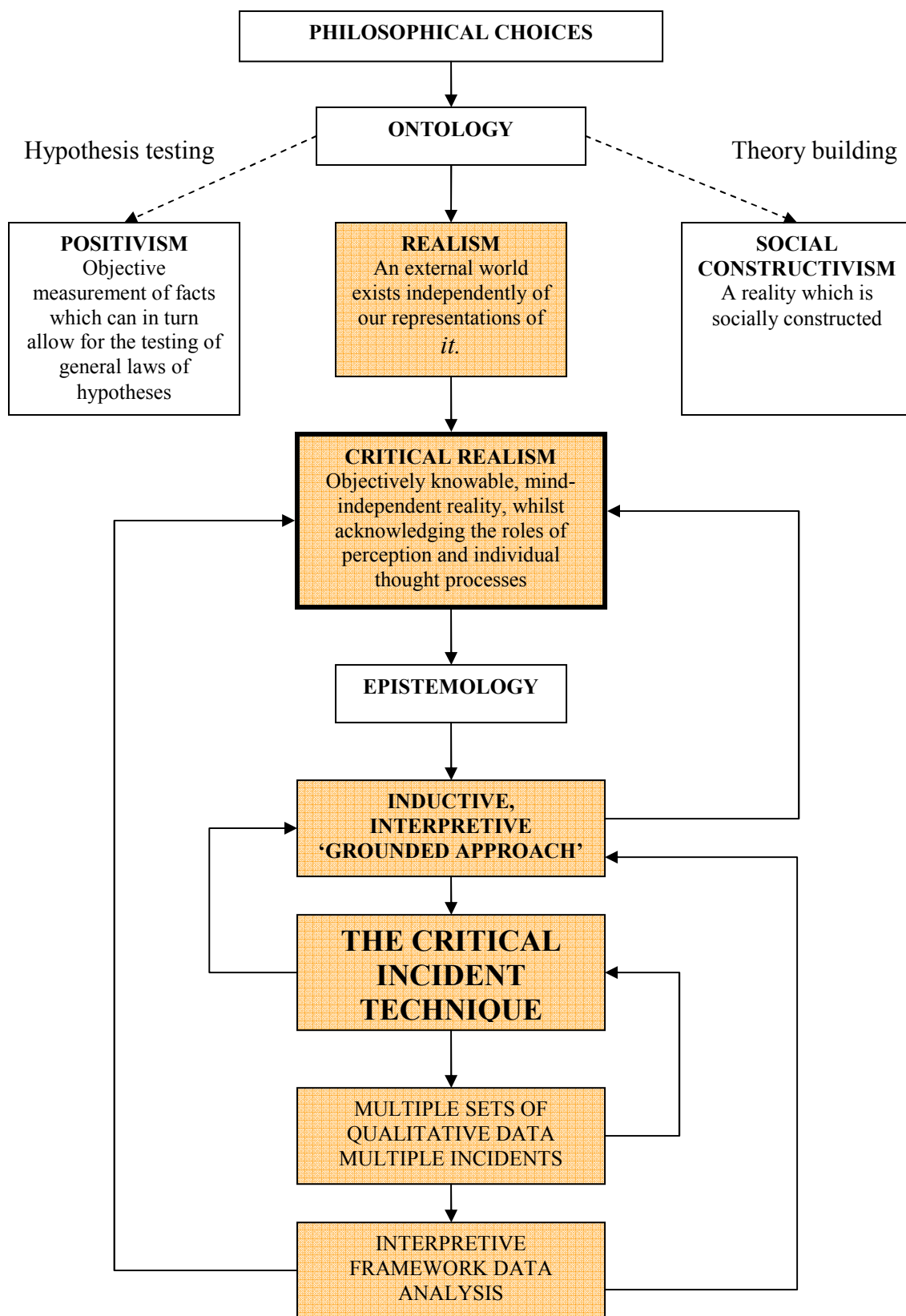


Figure 3.1 A Diagrammatic Representation of the Research Philosophy and Design

3.3 RESEARCH METHODS

This research was carried out using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; Bitner *et al.*, 1990) as the data collection method, where the key account managers retrospectively describe the naturally-occurring behaviours adopted in the handling intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts, while carrying out their internal selling role. Rich subjective accounts of internal conflicts and the behaviours used to manage internal conflicts were gathered through semi-structured CIT interviews using a digital voice recorder to collect the key account managers' perspectives on what actually took place in response to the specific internal conflict situation being analysed. The respondents in the research made their own judgments on what constituted internal conflict and what skills were used to manage that conflict. This fits well with the critical incident technique as the respondents identify the skills which are both effective and ineffective in conflict management in relation to a perceived outcome (Flanagan, 1954; Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Bitner, Booms and Mohr, 1994). In order to fit with the critical incident technique, each respondent was asked to recollect, in their own words, two types of incident, those which were effectively resolved or mitigated, and those which were ineffectively resolved or exacerbated. In addition, each participant was asked to recollect the skills and behaviours adopted in the management of these conflict incidents and their perceptions of the outcome. The interviews were recorded, the material verbatim transcribed and the content analysed using a style of open, axial and selective coding using an interpretive framework (Spiggle, 1994) together with the categories or themes which were established through a review of the literature (see fig 2.6). The next section examines the data collection method, CIT, in greater detail.

3.3.1 The Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

The critical incident technique (CIT) is a method for obtaining detailed subjective reports relating to a specific activity while minimising interference from stereotypical reactions or received opinions (Flanagan, 1954). The subject, in this case the key account manager, is asked to focus on one or more critical incidents which they experienced personally in the field of activity being analysed. A critical incident is

defined as an incident which had an influencing effect on the final outcome (Flanagan, 1954); therefore, critical incidents can only be recognised retrospectively. CIT analysis then uses a method known as content analysis in order to summarise the experiences of all of the participating key account managers. For the purpose of this research, the unit of analysis will be the critical incident as described by the key account manager. The critical incident will be a state of conflict or undesirable situation (as perceived by the key account manager) arising within the organisation as a direct result of their customer orientation, and subsequent internal representation of the customer's needs.

Despite many variations in procedures for gathering and analysing critical incidents by researchers and practitioners, the basic principles of what makes up the critical incident technique remain the same. For an incident to be critical it must be an event which deviates significantly, positively or negatively, from what is normally expected (Edvardsson, 1992) and can be any human activity which is significantly complete and unique in its characteristics to allow inferences and predictions to be made about the behaviours of person performing the task (Flanagan, 1954) (This is also covered in the *data collection method* section of this chapter). The technique is the method by which observable behaviours are collected in such a way as to allow them to be used to determine future behaviour in similar situations (Flanagan, 1954; Bitner *et al.*, 1994). The critical incident technique, by a combination of the above definitions of its components, can be defined as a set of procedures for systematically identifying behaviours that contribute to the success or failure of individuals or organisations in specific situations (Flanagan, 1954).

A Brief History of CIT

As previously discussed, the CIT approach consists of a set of procedures used for collecting the details of human behaviour that are critical in determining the outcome of an event. Colonel John C. Flanagan, Director of the Division of Aviation Psychology, inspired the present form of CIT in 1954. It was originally described in his article in the July 1954 Psychological Bulletin which is now credited as being one of the most cited articles in psychology. Flanagan's work was carried out as part of the Aviation Psychology Program of the United States Army Air Forces during World War II, where

Flanagan conducted a series of studies focused on differentiating effective and ineffective work behaviours exhibited by test pilots to determine the causes of crashes. From this beginning, CIT has developed to being used as a method to improve working practices, define job requirements, and determine role competencies across a wide variety of disciplines including marketing (Gremler, 2003) and service research (Grace, 2007; Chung-Herrera, Goldschmidt and Hoffman, 2004).

CIT in Management Research

Currently, CIT is widely used in organisational development and as a research technique for the recommendation of solutions to organisational problems which are rooted in employee behaviour (Stitt-Gohdes *et al.*, 2000). CIT is, in this respect, generally used as an interview technique where the participants are encouraged to give rich accounts of organisational incidents instead of answering direct survey-style questions. The idea is that the strengths and weakness of the organisation's performance in certain circumstances are displayed during abnormal or difficult situations as experienced directly by the actors involved. The use of the CIT in this context avoids the participants expressing stereotypical opinions about management, individuals, working procedures and processes but allows for the assessment of performance through analysing the participants' accounts of their skills and behaviours used to manage a specific incident or situation (Bitner *et al.*, 1994). Although not previously applied to the analysis of key account manager behaviours, the CIT method is well established (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson and Maglio, 2005) and widely used in marketing and marketing-related disciplines including numerous studies which investigate the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in service encounters (Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Gremler, 2003, 2004) and the analysis of critical service incidents (Chung-Herrera *et al.*, 2004). This research is therefore a first in the personal selling context.

A search of studies using CIT on the citation search database identifies over 140 published articles in marketing alone over the last 30 years with CIT being described, defined and used in a number of different ways (Gremler, 2003) including critical incident analysis (Gould, 1999), critical incidents technique (Schwab, Heneman and

DeCotis, 1975; Talarico, 2002), and critical incident reflection (Francis, 1995). This has led to concern over certain aspects of the methods, sampling, validity, reliability, objectivity, and how it is systematised, and a call for research to follow a standard procedure as described by Flanagan (1954) (Butterfield *et al.*, 2005). Gremler (2003) noted that, in the published marketing studies, 77% did not provide a detailed account of the protocols followed; therefore, in order to fit Flanagan's (1954) method while allowing the required flexibility to fit the key account management context, strict protocols were developed for data collection. Moreover, when followed to the letter using the steps as set out by Flanagan (1954) the CIT has a number of advantages over the standard semi-structured interview as outlined below (Gremler, 2003);

CIT Strengths and Advantages:

- CIT focuses on the unusual or rare events that might otherwise be missed
- It provides in-depth accounts of actual events
- It is a flexible method that can be used to improve many organisation systems and processes.
- CIT is useful for investigating cause and severity in unusual situations
- CIT provides a rich set of data for analysis.
- It is flexible in its application; questionnaires or interviews can be used.

These advantages of CIT again fit well with the research philosophy, with CIT being ideally suited to this kind of exploratory study. The method is structured in its approach to obtaining details of specific incidents and is equally flexible in its application, allowing for extensive elaboration on the context of the incidents under investigation through the use of open interview procedures.

Gremler (2003) also highlights some limitations of CIT which need to be considered. These limitations, again, depend upon the philosophical position and reflect the use of CIT in a more positivist ontological paradigm. They are outlined below:

CIT Drawbacks and Disadvantages:

- CIT is often criticised over issues of reliability and validity being a content analysis method.
- Being exploratory in nature all events are recorded however small; thus, there can be issues over validity since all aspects of the event are covered.
- The accounts of incidents are retrospective, the actual events are not observed.
- Since critical incidents often rely on memory, incidents may be imprecise or may even go unreported.
- Because it focuses on the rare events, more common events might well be missed.

The issue of reliability and validity is covered later in the chapter and refers specifically to the data collection and analysis methods by following Flanagan's (1954) method precisely. The remaining limitations are covered in the data analysis, as a grounded approach using the whole interview transcript rather than just the incidents, all emerging themes are considered. Since the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role is a new domain for this method, how it is operationalised in this context needs to be considered.

3.3.2 Operationalising CIT

Flanagan identified five steps involved in CIT. The first is determining the general aim of the study (ie a brief statement of the topic under study). The second step of CIT is to plan and specify how factual incidents regarding the general aim of the study will be collected. This determines the development of criteria used to decide which interactions are to be observed and recorded. The third step is to collect the data. Data collection may occur via interview or may consist of an observer writing reports. According to Flanagan (1954), all data should be objective in order to validate behaviour in this context, defining objectivity as the tendency for a number of independent observers to make the same report (Flanagan, 1954). That is to say that the recorded accounts of the participants involved would remain the same regardless of who carried out the recording. The fourth step in CIT is to analyse the data. The analysis should be

summarised and the data described efficiently so they can be used for practical purposes. However, Flanagan (1954) acknowledges that this fourth step is more subjective and reliant upon individual interpretation of the data. The fifth and final step is to interpret and report on the incidents being studied – again subjective and reliant on the interpretation on the report author’s interpretation of the data (Flanagan, 1954). These five steps are summarised in Figure 3.2:

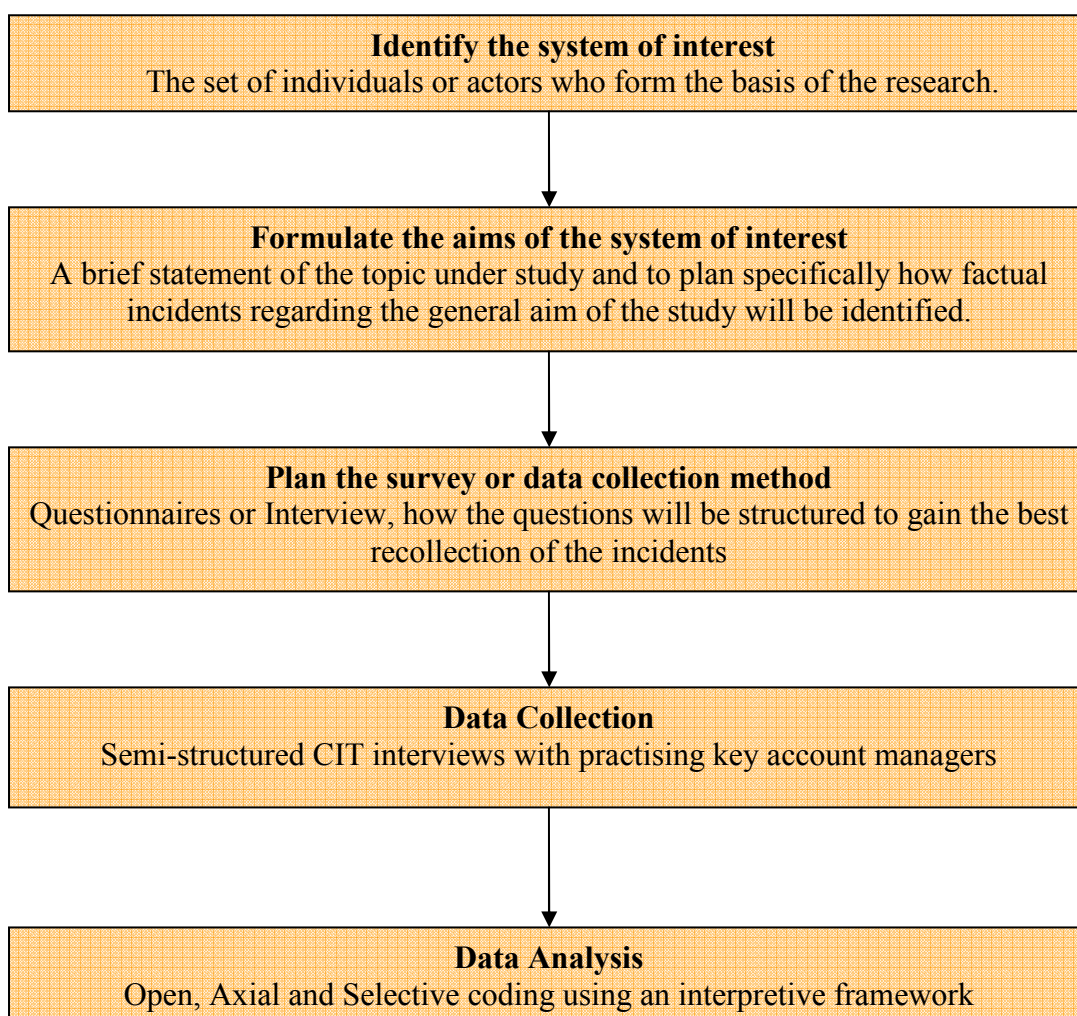


Figure 3.2 Flanagan’s (1954) Five Steps to the CIT

These five steps now need to be applied to the field of study; i.e., the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role. The first four

stages will be considered as a component of the research protocols with the data analysis method being dealt with later in this chapter.

CIT Interview Protocols

A critical incident report or data set should describe a situation or incident and the actions that were important, significant or critical in determining whether the outcome was effective or ineffective. Flanagan (1954) emphasises that the CIT should be thought of as a flexible set of principles which can be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand, again lending itself to being used as a methodology for the exploration of key account manager behaviour within the organisation. However, given the concern over deviations from the original method, giving rise to the limitations previously discussed, this research follows Flanagan's (1954) directions precisely (Butterfield *et al.*, 2005). This research includes a clear and concise statement of the purpose or aim of the study; specifications for the types of data to be collected; plans for selection of the key account managers to be studied; guidelines for observing, interpreting and classifying critical incidents; plans for analysing the data and for interpreting and reporting results. The following criteria need to be met for a successful CIT analysis (Flanagan, 1954):

- a) Data are related to real critical incidents that occurred during a task performance – for this research conflict incidents as perceived and experienced by the key account manager while carrying out the internal selling role.
- b) Tasks are performed by genuine users, practitioners; in this research real key account managers.
- c) The respondents or practitioners are located in their normal working environment, the key account managers interviewed at their place of work or in the field.
- d) The data recorded refers to real task situations, not laboratory settings, real conflicts experienced by the key account managers.
- e) The respondents self-report their own critical incidents retrospectively, as they perceive them.

- f) There is no direct interaction between respondent and researcher during the description of the incident(s) other than asking the questions and giving prompts.

This research follows the five steps for carrying out the CIT as developed by Flanagan in 1954. Steps 1 to 4 are detailed below as used in preparation for the open, semi-structured CIT interviews with practising key account managers in the field. Step 5, the data analysis method, is described later in this chapter. The interview protocols are also present in appendix A-1.

The System of Interest

Following the CIT protocols, for the purpose of this research the system of interest will be the key account management sales team. Each individual key account manager can be considered as a ‘subsystem’ of the team, who operates and functions as part of the team and parent organisation, the ‘suprasystem’, in performing their sales duties. In selecting the respondents or key account managers the following strict selection protocols were followed:

- a) The participants had to meet Napolitano’s (1997) definition of a key account manager: the sales manager who is responsible for speaking to large, complex, strategically important customers in one voice representing the full capabilities of their organisation.
- b) The team of key account managers had to be in excess of two in order to gain at least a dual perspective on the nature of any conflict experienced within the organisation. However, with the critical incident being the unit of analysis, the focus was on obtaining descriptions of a least four incidents from each participating account manager.
- c) The organisation had to have an established key account management system, where the key account managers had responsibility for strategically important

accounts and established long term relationships. To achieve this, those organisations participating had to be a ‘blue chip’² fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) business to business, goods manufacturers supplying US or UK major grocery, high street, convenience or wholesale retailers. In this respect the organisations had key account managers with the same role in the same type of market; i.e., the key account managers had to be externally-facing in their role that is to say, operating in a business to business environment.

- d) The key account managers needed to function as part of a key account management team managing internal relationships in addition to the customer relationship.

Taking these points into consideration the sampling rationale was established as described in the following section.

Sampling Rationale

The organisations participating in this study needed to fit the selection criteria as set out in the CIT system of interest as previously discussed. For this research, seven FMCG organisations participated with each organisation meeting the required criteria; i.e., they were in the FMCG, food and drinks industries supplying major grocery multiple, wholesale and convenience retail groups as their key accounts. The seven participating organisations fitting the criteria did, however, operate within different product categories.

By using the CIT, the actual unit of analysis in this research becomes the conflict episode as experienced and described by the key account managers involved. The key account manager therefore needed to be established within their organisations and able to recollect a number of incidents. In order to provide a data set rich enough for analysis a minimum of 100 clear incidents needed to be described across the participating

² The Encyclopaedia of Small Businesses defines ‘Blue Chip’ in terms of stock as one that is well-established, financially sound, and historically secure. ‘Blue Chip’ companies are those that have a history of posting earnings and paying dividends, all while continuing to increase profits.

organisations (Gremler, 2003). Therefore this research required multiple interviews to be conducted within each organisation in order to maximise the number of incidents described and investigate the influencing variables upon any conflict situation described. In taking this approach, a greater number of influencing factors on the perception of conflict within the organisation could be studied.

In order to add an international dimension to the study one of the organisations participating was based in the United States, with the account managers operating in the U.S. and managing major U.S. retail customers which again met the selection criteria.

The Aims of the System of Interest

The second stage of the CIT is to identify the aims of the system of interest, as without a statement of the general aims of the system of interest, no planning and evaluation of behaviours is possible. The statement should be as broad and simple as possible. Napolitano (1997) defines the key account manager as being the person who manages business relationships within key, strategically important accounts; the sales manager who is responsible for speaking to large, complex, important customers in one voice which fully represents their capabilities. Following this definition, the aim of the key account manager is to maximise the sales potential within their customer base while maintaining and developing meaningful relationships with all parties involved. Moreover, specifically in the context of this research, the aim of the key account manager is to effectively communicate the needs of the customer internally, within their organisation as part of the internal sales process and manage any resulting disputes or conflict episodes. Therefore, in the context of this research, the aim of the system of interest is to manage internal incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. For the purpose of this research the critical incidents are unique, identifiable situations significantly different from the normal daily routines, any undesirable situations, misunderstandings, conflicts, disputes or disagreements which arise internally and present a barrier to the key account managers achieving their goals.

The data collection method

As previously discussed, the unit of analysis in this research is the incident of conflict within the organisation as described by the key account managers involved. The critical incidents described were conflict episodes, disputes, undesirable situations, misunderstandings or disagreements, as perceived by the key account manager, arising as a direct result of their responsibilities in carrying out their internal selling role (the identified general aim of key account management team) which created a barrier to achieving their goals. The target participants for the study were individual key account managers who manage accounts which fit the definition of a key account with the research participants being from organisations meeting the selection protocols. Through a semi-structured CIT interview process, each participant was asked to recollect critical incidents or conflict episodes arising from their internal selling role. In order to fit with the critical incident technique, each respondent was asked to recollect, in their own words, two types of incident, those which were effectively resolved or mitigated, and those which were ineffectively resolved or agitated; i.e., an outcome which the respondent found unsatisfactory. Through open questions, each participant was asked to recollect the skills and behaviours adopted in the management of these critical incidents or conflict episodes and give their perceptions of the outcome. In this study the opening of the interviews followed a semi-structured method allowing the participants to describe their perceptions of the nature of any conflict encountered within the organisation, prior to describing specific critical incidents. This allowed the respondents to get into a specific mindset and provided clarity for the CIT part of the interview. After moving on to describe the specific incidents, the interviews closed with the participants describing their perceptions of the frequency and abundance of the conflict episodes they encountered. The interviews were recorded and the voice files verbatim transcribed. (The interview questions are detailed in appendix A-1).

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Having collected the data, the fifth step in the CIT is analysis of the data. Because CIT is often criticised over issues of reliability and validity of the analysis method, in this

research an interpretive framework (Spiggle, 1994) for coding was adopted together with a thematic approach to exploring the research question. In taking this approach, the transcripts were analysed separately for each of the themes under investigation with the emphasis being on the relationships between the coded data addressing the issues of reliability and validity. The interpretive framework is discussed later in this chapter.

3.4.1 A Thematic Approach

In exploring the research question, a thematic approach was taken. Each of the interview transcripts was analysed separately for each of the themes under investigation. The interview structure and protocols allowed for some questioning outside of the CIT component of the interview. This is represented in figure 3.3.

Theme 1 was explored in the first stage of the interview process, where the introduction, was used to explore the key account manager's perception of conflict within the organisation. Four open questions were designed to elicit information on what the key account managers considered to be the source of conflict within the organisation, how they felt about it and what it meant to them.

Theme 2 was explored in the second stage of the interview process which included the CIT component of the research. The CIT component of the interview was repeated for each of the specific incidents of conflict described by the key account manager. Here the participants were asked to describe recent incidents of conflict and how this conflict was managed. The participants were asked to providing details of two incidents were they believed the behaviours were effective and two incidents were they believed the behaviours were ineffective.

Theme 3 was explored in the final stage of the interview to explore the key account managers' views on the frequency and abundance of conflicts which they experienced within the organisation. Whether incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict occur as infrequent isolated incidents or occur more frequently and simultaneously. (The research protocols and questions can be found in appendix A-1).

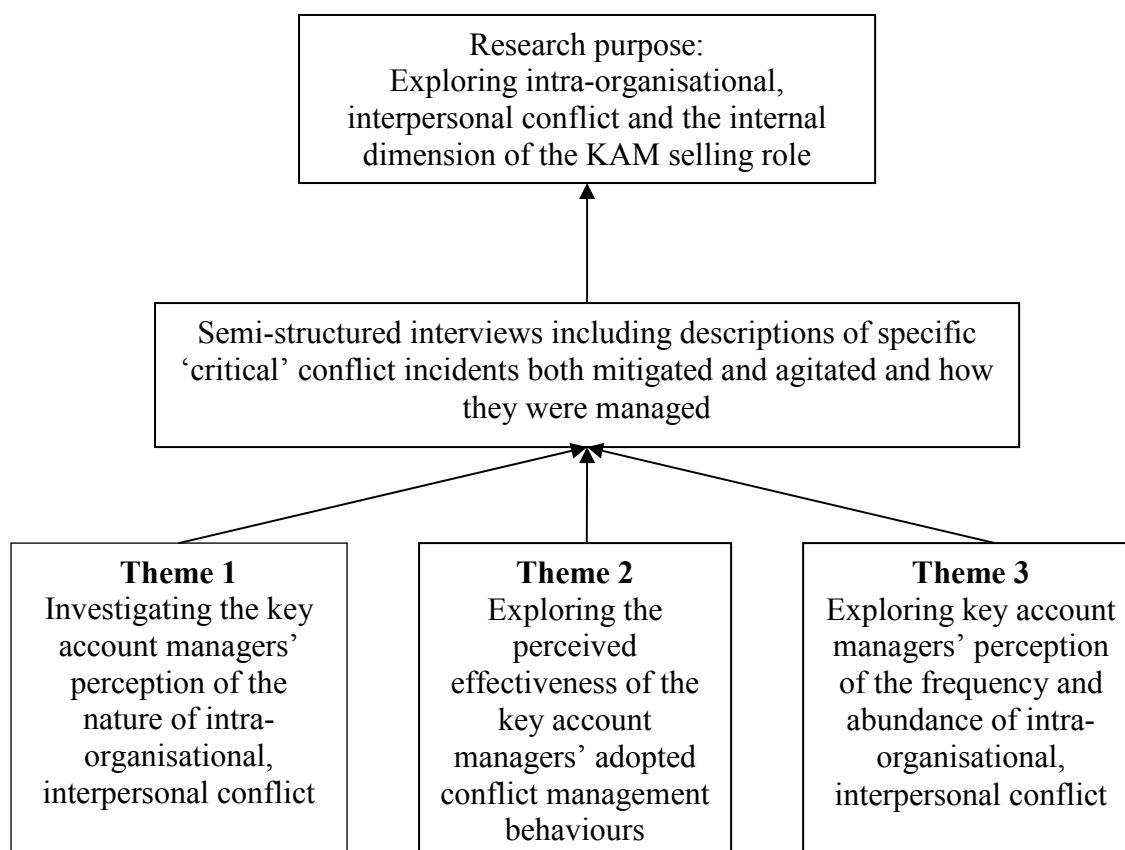


Figure 3.3 Diagrammatic Representation of the Research Objectives

This thematic approach is continued throughout this thesis with the findings and discussion presented in this way.

3.4.2 Coding

The data analysis followed a style of open, axial and selective coding under the themes which were established and discussed previously. In taking this thematic approach, the analysis is bound by the themes under investigation and these aspects of organisational conflict theory, this being a grounded approach as opposed to true emergent coding or grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). The coding follows an interpretive framework (Spiggle, 1994) in order to maintain a robust, structured approach. The transcripts were open coded bottom up for each of the themes and the free nodes categorised into related groups or open codes, reflecting the research question and the

theme under investigation; i.e., the nature of conflict, conflict management behaviours and the frequency or abundance of conflict. As the open codes and free nodes developed, revisions were made as necessary, and the categories tightened to a point that maximised mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness (Webber, 1990; Spiggle, 1994). In this way the data analysis moved beyond simple word counting, making the technique particularly rich and meaningful but reliant upon the coding and categorising of the data (Spiggle, 1994). In this research, a data category is a group of words with similar meaning or connotation in relation to the research question. The categories were further structured into higher order categories and sub-categories which inform the theme under investigation. In the following sections, the coding process is discussed in greater detail. Theoretical memos were developed throughout the coding process to capture the emerging categories and their relationships. This allows the research to move beyond simple coding, and capture inferences and relationships throughout which help in the formulation of the final thesis manuscript (Bohm, 2004; Charmaz, 2006).

The complete set of transcripts was analysed using the following coding methods for each of the themes under investigation, in this way each of the incidents described was subjected to a complete data analysis allowing a synopsis of the incidents to be created. For the second theme under investigation the effectiveness of the established behaviours; collaboration, accommodation, competing, avoiding and compromise (Thomas 1976) were used. For the second theme the data analysis was used to provide insights into the key account managers' behavioural choices and their perception of the outcomes following the CIT protocols. Each of the coding stages will now be presented.

Open Coding

Open coding is used by researchers as the first stage in the process of qualitative analysis to bring together data and ideas. Data analysis of verbal communication using open coding is a research method that consists of a set of procedures and techniques which draw inferences from the transcript text and has a long history in the social sciences. The process involves disaggregating the data into conceptual categories, for this research; the nature of conflict, conflict management behaviours and the frequency

or abundance of conflict within the organisation (Saunders *et al.*, 2003). The emphasis in this grounded approach is to derive meaning from the accounts of the critical incidents as perceived and described by the key account managers involved. Strauss and Corbin (1994) advise against using terms that are found in existing theory and advocate the use of terms that emerge from the data or terms used by the participants. However, this study takes a thematic approach in its investigation and although the categories were formed from the emergent codes in the data, they were contextualised into the theme under investigation (Gummersson, 1987). For the three categories under study, each category was coded using the terms emerging from the data and the accounts of the key account managers involved, referred to as *in-vivo* coding. Initial coding was carried out manually through an iteration of the interview transcripts in order to become more familiar with the data and identify key words and phrases with which to start the computer assisted coding. This allows for reflection on the data in order to see the emerging concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). A computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software tool was used in the first instance to carry out a complete coding of the data, in this case NVivo 8.0 (Bazeley, 2007). The use of a software tool allowed the data to be kept and analysed in one place and proved to be a familiarisation tool as well as a coding tool allowing for efficient management of quotations from the text. This early coding was then analysed further using manual coding methods allowing the data from each specific incident to be coded and categorised (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). This has to be a manual method since the incidents are embedded in the text.

Axial Coding

Following a grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) the next stage in the coding process was axial coding or a study of the relationships between the categories of data which have emerged from the open coding process. The process results in the creation of a hierarchy through bottom up coding, where free nodes (themes of data from open coding) are grouped together based upon their relationship with the emergence of sub-categories allowing further exploration of the overall category being investigated (Gummersson, 1987). This process of identifying relationships leads to an explanation

of the relationships and forms the basis of the theory building process (Bazeley, 2007). This process is also referred to as clustering and is designed to cluster concepts around a central idea and involves bringing together the free nodes which have a meaningful relationship (Bazeley, 2007).

Selective Coding

The most advanced stage of coding in this research deals with multiple sets of data. Once analysed, a number of key categories and subcategories (NVivo 8.0 tree nodes) were developed and in the selective coding process one category was identified which will become a central or core higher order category (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) around which other sub-categories will be organised integrating the data and developing further theory from the transcripts. The following interpretive framework for coding (Spiggle, 1994) was used as a framework for the coding process providing a more robust structure to follow when taking this grounded approach and it therefore addresses the key limitations highlighted earlier in this chapter.

3.4.3 An Interpretive Coding Framework

Adapting Spiggle (1994) to incorporate the three different coding methods, the interpretive framework for coding provided a structure to work against when coding multiple sets of data in order to effectively take a grounded approach and study the emergent theory from the data (Spiggle, 1994). Here the emphasis is on investigating the relationships between the key categories moving beyond open coding (Saunders *et al.*, 2003) and systematically to analyse multiple data sets in the same way by exploring the relationships between the emerging categories. The interpretive framework for grounded theory analysis used in this research as proposed by Spiggle (1994) denotes a series of important steps in the objective analysis of interpretive data as depicted in table 3.2.

Spiggle (1994) adopts a staged system for data analysis which set out a series of processes that need to be carried out with each data set (in this research a data set

consists of a series of transcripts from one participating organisation, seven sets of data in total). These stages did not necessarily run in the order presented but were conducted across the data at each stage of the research development. As a series of interviews was completed, the analysis was started with the data being compared to the previous transcripts obtained. The initial stages of categorisation though comparison were carried out using the data analysis tool. In order to fully explore the emerging categories and their relationships, data analysis moved beyond the selection of nodes to looking at the text and grouping related themes together.

| Framework Stage | Coding Process | Description |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Categorisation | Open | The process of classifying units of data, grouping data into categories of the same general theme. |
| Abstraction | Open and Axial | Building upon categorisation identifying higher order constructs, less general, more specific. |
| Comparison | Axial | Explores differences and similarities across the identified constructs within the data. |
| Dimensionalisation | Axial and Selective | Identifies properties of the categories and constructs to aid in theory construction. |
| Integration | Axial and Selective | Constructs theory by merging categories which aid in explaining higher categories. |
| Iteration | Selective | Moves through the data and analysis to shape the future direction for later data collection. |
| Refutation | Selective | Subjects emerging inferences to empirical scrutiny. |

Table 3.2 Interpretive Coding Framework, from Spiggle (1994)

Categorisation

As previously discussed, open coding was used as the first stage of data analysis allowing the researcher to become familiar with the data. This initial coding method was carried out while still collecting data, allowing the researcher to fine tune the interview techniques and write memos in subsequent interviews reflecting the initial coding. Following Strauss (1987), this early coding by each of the themes under investigation formed the basis of *categorisation* where the data was grouped into categories having of the same general theme. For example, when coding for the perceived nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict, all the transcripts were coded in full and data with similar meanings grouped together.

Abstraction

Moving on from straightforward open coding to a form of axial coding, these groups of data were categorised into higher order categories based on their relationships. This process of *abstraction* built the core constructs upon which the research is founded. Following the example of the perceived nature of conflict, the higher order categories of the sources and consequences of conflict emerged. (See chapter 5)

Dimensionalisation

Once the higher order categories had been established, the next step was to identify the constructs in each of the categories which form the basis of the emerging theory. Although the emerging theory is bound by the theme under investigation, the emerging theory for the perceived nature of conflict only deals with what conflict is perceived to be by the key account manager. The higher order category of conflict source when *dimensionalised* also considers conflict typology and perceived level within the organisation, these being dimensions of conflict source.

Integration

Up to this point, the analysis was based on single sets of data (interview transcripts from one organisation). As more data became available the next step was to analyse the new data *integrating* these new findings into the previously analysed data. Through this stage, the emerging categories were built for all the sets of data as the coding process continued throughout the data collection.

Iteration

The total timescale for the data collection was just over one year, from February 2007 through to March 2008. Since the interview method followed the CIT guidelines, the actual data collection method did not change. *Iteration* as outlined by Spiggle (1994) was limited to variations in the interview technique in order to elicit responses which best provided data for use in answering the research question. For example, in the early interviews, the interviewees found it difficult to distinguish between behaviours and skills when discussing specific incidents. This became evident through the ongoing data analysis, allowing the researcher to use prompts in subsequent interviews (without leading or influencing the interview) in order to gain recollections of behaviours rather than skills.

Refutation

Spiggle (1994) refers to *refutation* as subjecting the emerging theory to empirical scrutiny. With one of the conditions of access being total anonymity (key account manager behaviours and internal relationships being a potential source of competitive advantage) only the researcher had access to the interview transcripts. Therefore it was not possible to allow academic peers to check the data transcripts for consistency.

In the following section details of how the coding was put into practice will be covered.

Putting Coding into Practice

To demonstrate how the data were analysed this section looks at the analysis of one of the themes under investigation (the perceived nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict), the categories emerging early in the data collection, and how these subsequently built into the higher categories and theories developed later in this thesis.

Manual, open coding was used as the first stage of data analysis. This analysis was conducted immediately following each data collection after each of the interview transcripts was verbatim transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts from each of the interviews were printed leaving a wide right-hand margin which could be used to take notes as the manual coding process progressed. Taking the first theme under investigation, that of the perceived nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict; the transcripts were analysed identifying any reference to the perceived nature of conflict within the organisation. These references were then highlighted in the text and comments made in the right-hand margin. This form of data analysis did not produce any quantification of the data in any form following Strauss and Corbin (1994). Each subsequent set of interviews were initially analysed in the same way for each of the three themes under investigation. A set of interviews was deemed to be all the interviews conducted at a single participating company; typically, four interviews.

After the initial manual open coding process the transcripts were loaded into the CAQDA software package NVivo 8.0 for further software-assisted data analysis. Colour coding was used for the emerging categories (Bazeley, 2007). For example, the categorisation for the perceived nature of organisational conflict highlighted the raw data concerning the participants' views of conflict within the organisation, i.e., what conflict looked like, felt like, where it came from, why they felt it occurred, how it made them feel and what they thought constituted conflict within the organisation. The CAQDA software allows for the coding of data sources into loose categories, or groupings of stories with the same inference or references, allowing relationships to be established across transcripts. Thus, each preceding transcript was analysed and

reviewed as each additional transcript became available. In this way, any new emerging categories were identified and their relationships to the previous transcripts established this formed the basis of 'constant comparison' critical to data interpretation taking a grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Heath and Cowley, 2003). In line with Spiggle (1994), this stage follows the open coding, categorisation stage of the interpretive framework.

The next stage in the data analysis involved the abstraction of the transcripts in order to establish the higher order constructs within the data. Here the analysis became more specific. For example, at this stage the data analysis showed that the participants perceived conflict in a number of different ways. It was therefore abstracted that conflict was seen to have both a perceived source and a consequence (these findings are presented in detail in chapters 4 to 7). To achieve this abstraction it was important to move beyond the more general manual open coding technique to a form of more specific axial coding structure allowing for further exploration of the emerging categories (Gummesson, 1997; Spiggle, 1994).

Axial coding distinguishes the core constructs around which other concepts revolve. For example, the concept of the perceived positive consequences of conflict within the organisation (see chapter 5) was a category which emerged early from the participants' comments on increased competitive behaviour, stimulation, motivation and creativity. This emergent category was then cross-checked across all of the transcripts to determine if any fixed pattern or differences existed. This process constitutes the comparison stage of Spiggle's (1994) interpretive framework and was carried out for each of the emergent categories for each theme under investigation. However the data analysis under the theme of the perceived nature of conflict within the organisation also identified the perceived negative consequences of conflict, specifically the frustration experienced by the participants at having to deal with frequent episodes of what they perceived to be unnecessary conflict. The next step in the data analysis called for the categories to be dimensionalised (Spiggle, 1994) into the higher order category of the perceived consequences of conflict. That is, the creation of a construct from which theory can be built. This demonstrates how Spiggle's (1994) framework from open coding and

categorisation through to dimensionalisation was applied to the investigation of the perceived nature of conflict within the organisation, specifically the emergence of the higher order category for the consequences of conflict.

As more data were collected through more interviews with additional organisations the analysis became more integrative and iterative (Spiggle, 1994). Following the first theme under investigation, stories were grouped based on the participants' interpretation of conflict within the organisation. At this stage the new data were subjected to the same processes of data analysis as previously discussed, together with a re-evaluation of the data analysis already completed. This re-immersion in data and the resulting iterative nature of the data analysis provided the opportunity for emergent themes to develop into broader theoretical categorisations providing clear and concise interpretations of conflict within the organisational from the perspective of the key account managers involved.

For each of the themes under investigation the coding process was scrutinised at two specific stages by other researchers in order to refute or confirm the emergent categories from the coding processes carried out; first, after the initial dimensionalisation and second after the final analysis of the transcripts, prior to final theory building. Given the confidential nature of the transcripts this process was carried out through peer (other researcher) review of the analysis and was repeated for each of the theme under investigation both after the initial dimensionalisation and prior to the final frameworks being established. In this way, having guaranteed to participants that only the researcher would have access to the full transcripts of interviews, anonymity was upheld. Instead, the peer-to-peer review sought to establish "logical internal consistency".

Figure 3.4 presents a diagrammatic process diagram of the data analysis, coding process highlighting the three key stages of data collection, data analysis followed by refutation and iteration. Where other researchers challenged the findings from the analysis, this was taken into consideration through the iteration process as subsequent sets of data were analysed and the emergent categories developed to reflect the observations made.

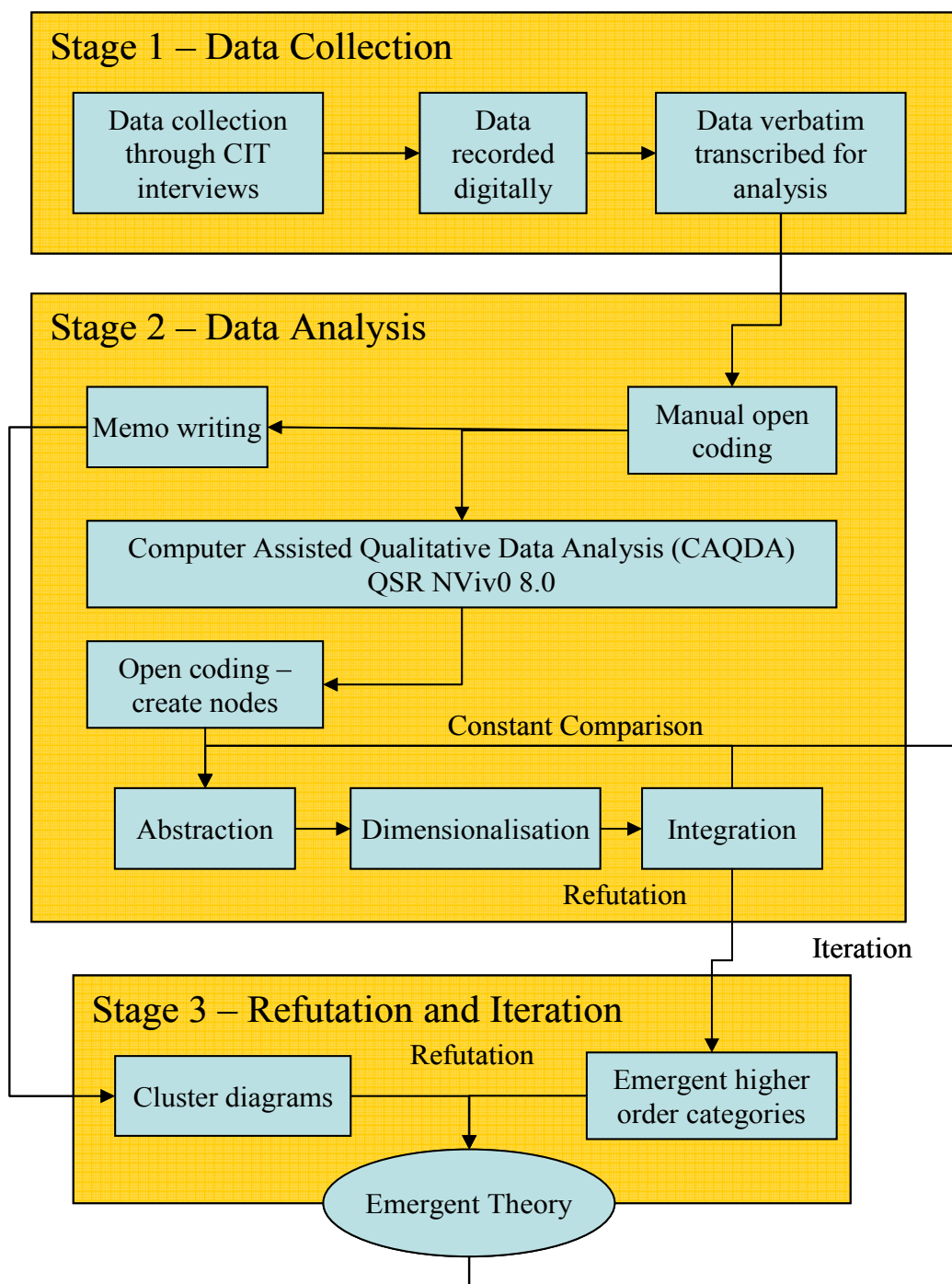


Figure 3.4 Process Diagram for Data Analysis

In order to further address the issues of consistency and reliability, in addition to the coding and checking methods outlined above, free memo writing and data consolidation techniques were used to collect thoughts throughout the coding process and put data into a format for presentation in the findings chapters (Gummersson, 1987). The written memos worked to chart and record details of the analytical stage of the research and took the form of notes, cluster diagrams and tables of comments (examples of the memos written for each of the themes are presented in appendix D-1, F-1 and H-1). In this way, consistency of data analysis was achieved through subjecting the data and emerging theory to additional scrutiny; i.e., the coding process was checked against the written memos, a key step between the collection of the data and the writing of final reports (Miles et al., 1990). As previously discussed in order to ensure that the emerging categories remained true to the key account managers' perception of conflict within the organisation, while maintaining participant confidentiality, regular peer review meetings took place with other researchers to discuss the emerging categories and their relationships.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

With qualitative data collection the researcher is expected to observe high ethical standards and this research, being no exception, was carried out having been approved by Cranfield's ethical standards. By its very nature qualitative research is exposed to a high degree of interaction, therefore consideration needs to be given to the ethical issues of informed consent and confidentiality (Berry, 1995; Gronroos, 1990).

The Issue of Informed Consent

Christians (2000) states that informed consent is one of the most critical issues in qualitative research and involves participants agreeing to be subjects of the research having been presented with all the facts regarding the research. In this research informed consent was gained through initial contact with the key account manager's senior management team. Approval was given for access after presenting the details of the research to the board of the participating organisations. In addition the key account

managers themselves were each given details of the research prior to the interview taking place. (The access letter is presented in appendix A-2). Each of the participants was also asked for permission to record interviewing them, and they were all aware that the interviews would be transcribed verbatim and quotations used in the write up of the PhD thesis.

The Issue of Confidentiality

Another critical consideration in qualitative research is that of confidentiality (Gronroos, 1990). For this research, using company names was considered to be inappropriate since the disclosed behaviours using the CIT are both positive and negative in their effect. It was also considered to be inappropriate to disclose any individual's identity therefore protecting the rights of the individual. Although informed consent was gained, the majority of the participating organisations did not want their identities revealed. Therefore the company names will not be disclosed, pseudonyms are used to disguise the identity of the individual and any real names, brand names or other parts of the transcripts which may identify the participants will not be used. However, representing the participants' contribution accurately is a vital component of this research and was addressed through the verbatim transcription of the interviews; only after the analysis stage were any identifiers removed. This was aided by the memo writing process, where detailed sections of the transcripts were collected and edited for use in the final PhD draft.

3.6 SUMMARY

When used properly and following Flanagan's (1954) steps, the critical incident technique is ideally suited to the observation of human behaviour in certain circumstances and, linked with coding using the interpretive structure for coding (Spiggle 1994), it provides a powerful tool for data collection and analysis. The major benefit of taking this research approach comes from the fact that it is based on the observations of the participants in their own words with the data analysis being a systematic, replicable process for compressing many words of data transcript into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding. It has the added attractive benefit of

being both cautious and precise, dealing with less common important incidents while providing data for analysis. The quality of the research centres on the reliability and validity of the data collected and the strict coding protocols applied in the data analysis together with making strict ethical considerations. The design, aims, question, philosophy, methodology and data analysis methods of this research are summarised in table 3.3.

| Research Design | Details |
|------------------------|--|
| Research aims | This is a piece of research which aims to explore one aspect of personal selling which has not been investigated before. It looks at how key account managers perceive and manage internal conflicts; i.e., the intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts which arise in trying to meet both their own organisations' needs and those of the customer. An exploration of conflict and the internal selling role. |
| Research question | How do key account managers perceive and manage interpersonal conflicts within their organisation? - How do key account managers perceive internal conflict? - How do key account managers deal with internal conflict? - How often do key account managers experience internal conflict? |
| Research philosophy | This research adopts a transcendental / critical realist approach in its ontology. It is interpretivist in its epistemology, centred around investigating actual internal conflicts as described by the participating key account managers. |
| Methodology | Critical Incident Technique – a grounded approach examining incidents of conflict with both functional and dysfunctional outcomes as experienced by the key account manager. Multiple data sets across different organisations in order to examine the maximum amount of incidents. |
| Units of analysis | At the level of understanding of the nature and frequency of conflict as experienced by the key account manager, the unit of analysis is the actor involved. At the level of the incident, examining the behaviours adopted in the management of the internal conflicts, the incident itself is the unit of analysis. |
| Data collection method | Semi - structured interviews. |
| Data analysis method | Open, axial and selective coding using NVivo 8.0 and an interpretive framework. |

Table 3.3 Research Design Summary

Having presented the data collection and analysis methods, the next four chapters will now go on to present the research findings. Chapter 4 presents the descriptive statistics relating to the demographic characteristics of the participants involved, while chapters 5 to 7 present the findings associated with each of the research themes under investigation:

1. Theme 1, the perception of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict: A KAM perspective.
2. Theme 2, KAM: The management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict.
3. Theme 3, the abundance of conflict within the organisation: A KAM perspective.

CHAPTER 4

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

4.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

| Pseudonym | Age | Length of Interview (minutes) | Total Number of Critical Incidents Described | +ve | -ve | Time in Current Role | Total KAM Experience | Number of Customers |
|-----------|-----|-------------------------------|--|-----|-----|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Stuart | 39 | 49 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2y 4m | 20y+ | 5 |
| Gerald | 39 | 44 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 1y | 3y 6m | 1 |
| Neil | 46 | 38 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 11m | 20y+ | 2 |
| Dirk | 37 | 53 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 10m | 9y | 3 |
| Jonathan | 34 | 38 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 8m | 5y | 22 |
| Paul | 32 | 48 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2y 4m | 7y | 5 |
| David | 39 | 38 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3y | 5y | 3 |
| Stephen | 50 | 34 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1y 4m | 10y | 3 |
| Carl | 42 | 38 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2y 4m | 12y | 1 |
| Peter | 33 | 44 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 4y | 7y | 4 |
| Kevin | 41 | 31 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 5y | 9y | 3 |
| Albert | 55 | 50 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 10y | 35y | 3 |
| Wendy | 41 | 32 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 3m | 7y | 1 |
| Carlos | 36 | 34 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 18m | 12y | 14 |
| Frank | 33 | 34 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2y 4m | 2y | 1 |
| William | 32 | 43 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 9m | 9y | 3 |
| James | 29 | 30 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 18m | 5y | 1 |
| Anna | 30 | 37 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 12m | 7y | 2 |
| Vincent | 49 | 47 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 18m | 30y | 1 |
| Jane | 32 | 43 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 20m | 5y | 1 |
| Larry | 26 | 35 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 10m | 3y 6m | 8 |
| Robert | 34 | 42 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 10m | 3y | 1 |
| Cliff | 34 | 43 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2y | 6y | 1 |
| Kenny | 34 | 44 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 10m | 3y | 1 |
| Joseph | 34 | 34 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1y | 3y 6m | 1 |
| Rose | 48 | 24 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2.5y | 23y | 1 |
| Ruben | 44 | 34 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2y | 17y | 3 |
| Max | 46 | 32 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 4y | 23y | 1 |
| Dean | 38 | 27 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 18m | 10y | 1 |

Table 4.1 Summary of Participant Demographic Characteristics

The aim of this chapter is to present the sample descriptive statistics; i.e., a summary of the descriptive data collected from the participating key account managers through the use of the participant profile questionnaire, appendix A-3. In order to understand the context in which this research was carried out it is necessary to present the details of the participants. A summary of these details is shown in table 4.1.

Before the interviews commenced, each of the participating key account managers was asked to complete a profile questionnaire (see appendix A-3); the descriptive statistics derived from this exercise are summarised in table 4.1 and also in appendix C.

The figures show that 14% are female (4 female and 25 male), that the average age at the time of the interviews was 38; the youngest respondents were 32, and the oldest was 55. The average length of service in their current role was 24 months ranging from three months to ten years; the longest serving participant had spent ten years in their current role while the shortest serving participant had only been in their current role for three months. The average time spent as a key account manager was ten years with a range from two years to 35 years. The oldest respondent did have the most experience as a key account manager although none of the younger participants had the least experience.

The participants in the research all worked as key account managers³ representing their manufacturing organisations within strategically important U.K. and U.S. retail customers and all of the organisations involved have a well established key account management programme. From a role perspective, 12 of the key account managers interviewed had direct reports and the number of customers for which the key account managers were responsible ranged from one to 22. Thirteen of the key account managers were office based, the remaining 16 field based, while seven dealt only with retailer branded (own label) products, the remaining 22 sold supplier high profile branded products.

³ For the purpose of this research, the key account manager is the salesperson responsible for the management of strategically important accounts to the organisation in which they are employed (Napolitano, 1997).

The data were collected using the methods outlined in the previous chapter with the findings being based on the 29 CIT interviews conducted with the participating key account managers. The interviews were conducted between February 2007 and February 2008, with 25 interviews being conducted in person and four by telephone. All of the interviewees were key account managers at the time of the interview; i.e., they were responsible for strategically important major accounts for their organisations although their actual job titles varied across organisations. The actual job titles are summarised in appendix C.

The interviews produced 1120 minutes of transcript with the average interview length being 39 minutes. From the 29 critical incident technique interviews conducted, 112 critical incidents were described with the required positive and negative outcomes, with an average of four per respondent. Sixty-nine incidents and the associated management behaviours adopted were described as having a positive outcome while 43 incidents were described as being ongoing or having an undesirable outcome, the latter being less frequent and much harder to describe by most participants. The interviewees identified between two and four positive and one or two negative incidents, averaging four incidents per interview, 60% of which were positive. This will be covered in more detail in chapter 6.

For confidentiality reasons, any information which may identify the individuals or participating organisation will not be disclosed, the names given were randomly generated, and in no way represent any of the actual participants. Again in order to maintain confidentiality, the seven participating organisations will be identified as A, B, C, D, E, F and G.

4.1.1 Participating Organisations

The participating organisations are all manufacturers of branded and retailer-branded products fitting into the category of fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), everyday consumer products with a relatively low value. Although the value of the items is low, the volume is immense, meaning these branded products are household names and are

of significant value to the retailer. Examples of the FMCG products produced by the participating companies include a wide range of frequently purchased consumer products such as personal care products (toiletries, soap, cosmetics, teeth cleaning and shaving products), household products (detergents and cleaning products), non-durables (glassware, light bulbs, batteries, disposable paper products and plastic goods), over the counter pharmaceuticals, some low value consumer electronics, a full range of packaged food products and drinks (fresh and ambient), confectionery and tobacco (newsstand products).

For commercial and ethical reasons the participant organisations requested to remain anonymous therefore the only detail which can be supplied is the product category in which they operate. One of the seven participating organisations is based in the U.S. with the key account managers having U.S. retail customer responsibility, whilst the other six had key account managers with the U.K. retail customer base. For all the key account managers involved, their customers were the major retailers with each organisation's top customer or key account being represented.

Company A is a major European supplier of toiletries and household goods to the major U.K. grocery multiple retailers (Asda, Tesco, J. Sainsbury and Morrison's) under the retailers' own brand and is a multinational operator with a well-established team of key account managers.

Company B is a global alcoholic beverage supplier to the major U.K. retailers, grocery, high street and convenience retail sectors and has well established globally recognisable branded products. Company B also supplies retailer own brand products to certain retailers.

Company C is a global supplier of fast moving goods to newsstands, forecourts, independent retailers, high street and major grocery multiples. The products again are highly recognisable global brands.

Company D is a U.K. based fresh food product supplier to the U.K. major grocery multiple retailers, supplying retailer own label products.

Company E is a global supplier of ambient food products to the major grocery retailers, selling a wide range of highly recognisable branded products.

Company F is a global drinks supplier, again with highly recognisable branded products supplied through a number of trade sectors including the major grocery multiples, high street, forecourts and convenience retail.

Company G is a global organisation supplying a wide range of branded products across a number of different categories in a wide retail customer base. All of the key account managers interviewed from company G were U.S. based and in full employment as key account managers at the time of the interviews.

4.1.2 Summary

It was the intention of this research to involve a wide variety of key account managers across a number of organisations in order to elicit as many accounts as possible and the widest range of incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. The objective was to reach saturation with the CIT component of the interviews achieving an average of four incidents per interviewee and achieving over 100 in total (Gremler, 2004).

In addition, the collection of the respondent profiles allowed for a more detailed analysis of the data and allowed the findings to be put into an organisational context. Although these participant attributes are not the focus of the research they help in the discussion to explain some of the responses. This chapter provides a brief overview of the sample in order to develop an understanding of the key account managers involved although not directly related to the research question. The following chapters will now present the key findings starting with the KAM perception of the nature of conflict within the organisation.

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS

THE NATURE OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT: A KAM PERSPECTIVE

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role, specifically how key account managers perceive and handle incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. The aim of the findings chapters is to report the research findings from the analysis of the data which are relevant in answering the principal research question:

'How do key account managers perceive and manage conflict⁴ within their organisations?'

In line with the thematic approach, as outlined in the methodology chapter 3.4.1 (fig 3.3), these findings are separated into three chapters, one for each of the three themes under investigation as outlined in the research framework:

Chapter 5 explores the interviews in depth, presenting the key account managers' perception of conflict within the organisation, and is split into two sections; the first deals with the perceived sources of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict and the second explores the consequences of this conflict. It is this section which sets the scene for the later findings, establishing a KAM context for this research into intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict.

Chapter 6 presents the findings from the critical incident technique component of the interviews and is also split into two main sections; the first presents details of the incidents described and the second explores the behaviours adopted in the management of the incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict.

⁴ Throughout the findings chapters, the word conflict when used alone refers specifically to incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict as perceived by the participating key account managers; i.e., between the account managers and another individual or group of individuals.

Chapter 7 presents the findings associated with the key account managers' overall perception of the frequency and abundance of conflict within the organisation; i.e., whether these incidents of conflict are perceived as discrete and isolated occurrences or something the key account managers are constantly dealing with, and forms the foundation of the research from a conflict management perception, presenting conflict as a series of simultaneous, multiple incidents as opposed to single isolated incidents.

Following the thematic approach described in chapter 3, the first theme under investigation is that of the key account managers' perception of conflict within their organisations, the perceived nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. Here the findings are presented which deal with the incidents of conflict as described by the key account managers when answering the first four open questions of the interview together with their CIT descriptions of specific conflict incidents (see appendix G). The focus of this part of the findings is to present where conflict may come from, what it looks and feels like from the participating key account managers' perception. These findings show that incidents of conflict frequently occur within the organisation as the key account managers carry out their internal selling duties, across functions and a wide variety of relationships. It is this perceived nature of conflict within the organisation which forms the foundation of the remaining findings and specifically considers the perceived sources and consequences of conflict within the organisation which can be severe resulting in a feeling of frustration, of having to do all the work for the team or of having to fight for every opportunity to achieve their account objectives but can also be perceived more positively as a role challenge. For the key account manager, the customer, although external, can also create issues within their own organisation and is viewed as a source of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict because of their constant demands. In representing their customers' needs internally the key account manager continually has to deal with a wide range of issues in order to maintain customer satisfaction. This section presents the findings associated with the key account managers' perceptions of the nature of conflict within their own organisations while carrying out their everyday selling role.

The findings are presented in four sections as discovered through analysis of the data and bound by the theme under investigation. The first two sections deal with the perceived sources of conflict within the organisation, the third presents the findings concerned with conflict composition and the fourth section presents the findings associated with the perceived consequences of conflict.

5.2 THE NATURE OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT: A KAM PERSPECTIVE

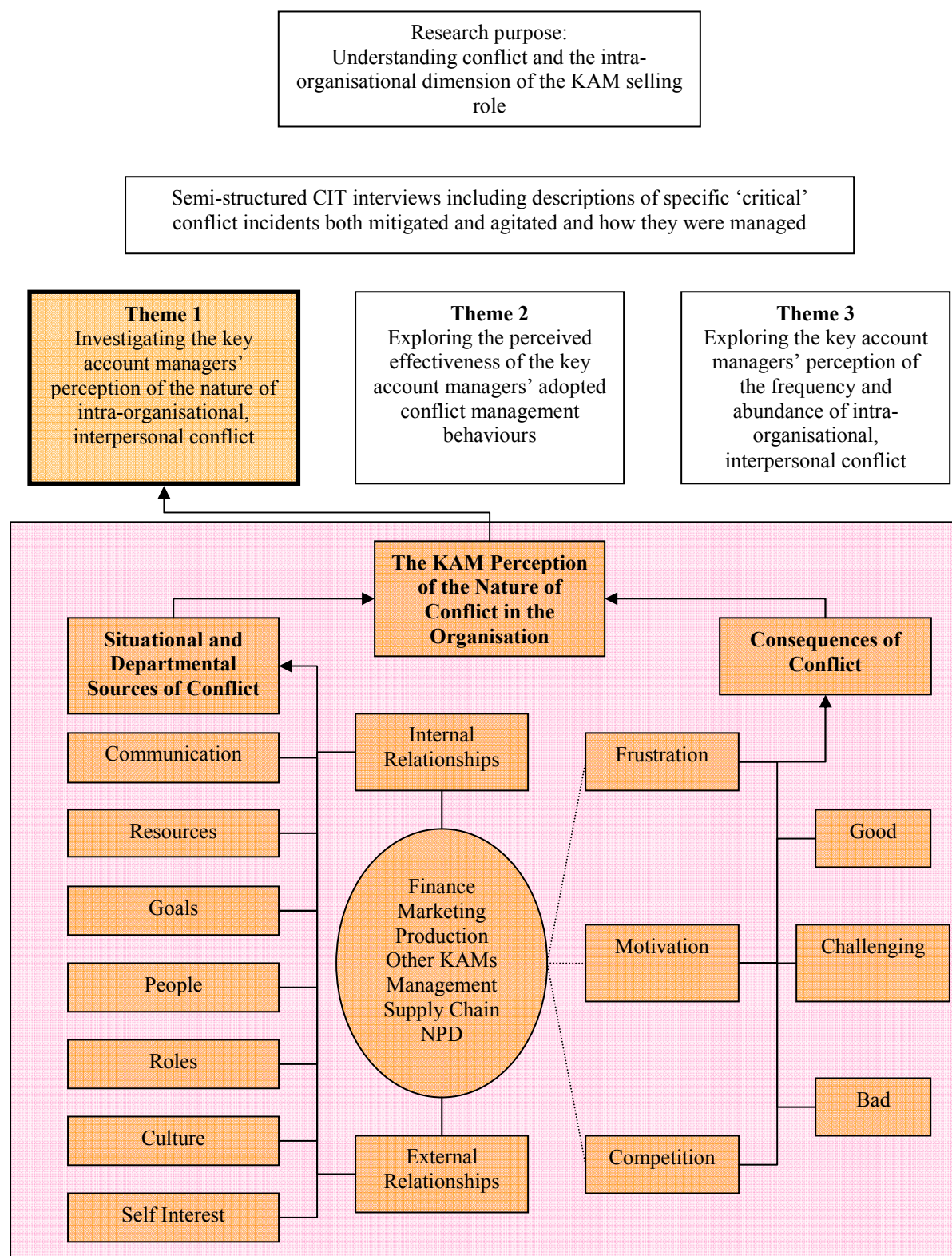


Figure 5.1 A Diagrammatic Representation of the Research Findings:
A KAM Perspective on the Nature of Organisational Conflict

The first theme under investigation is highlighted in figure 5.1. An analysis of the transcripts was carried out using an interpretive framework (Spiggle, 1994) in order to investigate what conflict within the organisation looks like to the participating key account managers, where it comes from and how it feels. Using NVivo 8.0 as the initial coding method the transcripts were disaggregated and analysed with all the comments which could be interpreted as having some reference to the perceived nature of conflict within the organisation recorded. In total over 5,000 references to conflict were recorded across the transcripts. These references were then categorised into emerging themes or open codes; i.e., groups of comments with the same meaning or inference. In total, when considering the relationships between the original references, 25 open codes were established. These open codes were then analysed further and 11 sub-categories created with seven situational sources of conflict and four consequences of conflict emerging, these informing the two higher order categories. These research codings are summarised in table 5.1 and a summary of the NVivo 8.0 coding ‘tree-node’ structure is presented in appendix D-2.

| Theme 1 | Higher Categories | Sub-categories | |
|---|---------------------------------|---|---|
| | | Situational | Departmental |
| <i>The Key Account Managers’ Perceived Nature of Intra-organisational, Interpersonal Conflict</i> | <i>Sources of Conflict</i> | <i>Resources</i> <i>People</i> <i>Communication</i> <i>Roles</i> <i>Goals</i> <i>Culture</i> <i>Self Interest</i> | <i>Internal Relationships</i> <i>Department</i> <i>External Relationships</i> |
| | <i>Consequences of Conflict</i> | <i>Challenging</i> <i>Frustration</i> <i>Competing</i> <i>Motivation</i> | <i>Good</i> <i>Bad</i> |

Table 5.1 Coding Summary for the Nature of Conflict

Upon further analysis, five more related sub-categories were also identified and subsequently included since they also had an overall relationship to the theme under investigation. Departmental sources of conflict covered the relationships within the

organisation and the external relationship with the customer which can also have an influence over the perceived situational sources of conflict within the organisation. In addition there is the perception of conflict as being good or bad; this is very closely linked to the consequences and provides the two final categories emerging from this investigation. Additionally, from free memo writing while coding following a grounded approach (Charmaz, 2006), cluster diagrams were developed and used to aid visualisation of the categories to show the relationships between the categories identified. These early findings were then developed and summarised to create the two higher categories; the sources (departmental and situational) and consequences of conflict. The memo and cluster diagram presenting these findings is in appendix D-1. It is this cluster diagram which led to the expansion of the thematic diagrammatic representation of the findings as shown in figure 5.1.

| Departmental Sources of Conflict | Situational Source of Conflict | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Communication | Resources | People | Roles | Goals | Self Interest | Culture |
| | No. of References | No. of References | No. of References | No. of References | No. of References | No. of References | No. of References |
| Marketing | 14 | 21 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 1 | 2 |
| Finance | 9 | 12 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Senior Management | 7 | 7 | 7 | 8 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| Production and Planning | 7 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| NPD and Technical | 5 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Other Key Account Managers | 3 | 0 | 12 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| Customer Services | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Supply Chain | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| HR | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 5.2 Summary of References to the Departmental and Relationship Sources of Conflict

Table 5.2 presents a summary of the findings related to both the situational and departmental sources of conflict. It shows the number of references throughout the described incidents by both perceived sources of conflict. The situational sources of conflict are the perceived reasons for conflict to occur within the organisation and are divided into seven sub-categories; communication, resources, people, roles, goals, self interest and culture. The departmental sources of conflict are the key account

managers' perceived location of the conflict or where the conflict comes from and are divided into nine sub-categories; marketing, finance, senior management, production, new product development (NPD), other key account managers, customer services, supply chain and human resources (HR). This summary will be referred to throughout this chapter with a further breakdown presented in each sub-section. Firstly the findings associated with the perceived departmental sources of conflict are presented followed by the perceived situation sources of conflict and the perceived consequences of the conflicts encountered.

5.2.1 Departmental Sources of Conflict - The Role of Relationships, Internal and External

The key account manager has to manage and maintain a number of relationships within the organisation across a number of different departments over whom they have no direct management responsibility. In considering the main component of the theme under investigation, the perceived nature of conflict, the role of their internal relationships emerged as having an influence on the perceived source. Before presenting the findings associated with the perceived situational sources of conflict, the KAM relationship aspects of conflict are presented, the findings relating to the departmental sources of conflict. In addition these findings also show how the external customer relationship has an internal impact.

| Internal Relationships | Department | No. of Respondents Referencing | No. of References from the Incidents |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Departmental Sources of Conflict | <i>Marketing</i> | 20 | 65 |
| | <i>Senior Management</i> | 15 | 39 |
| | <i>Other Key Account Managers</i> | 13 | 32 |
| | <i>Finance</i> | 11 | 30 |
| | <i>Production and Planning</i> | 11 | 22 |
| | <i>NPD and Technical</i> | 6 | 14 |
| | <i>Supply Chain</i> | 4 | 4 |
| | <i>Customer Services</i> | 2 | 3 |
| | <i>HR</i> | 1 | 1 |
| | TOTALS | <i>N/A</i> | 210 |

Table 5.3 Summary of References to the Departmental or Relationship Sources of Conflict

The number of respondents who directly mentioned an internal department one or more times is presented in Table 5.3, together with the total number of references to that department from all of the incidents described (the totals taken from table 5.2). The table shows that the marketing department is perceived to be the biggest departmental source of conflict, with supply chain, customer services and HR being the least. In later sections the departmental sources of conflict are presented in more detail with a breakdown for each department by perceived situational source of conflict; i.e., the ‘where’ and the ‘why.’ In this section only the departmental conflicts will be presented, in order to highlight the number of internal relationships which can be perceived as creating barriers to the KAM achieving their sales objectives. In this section the different departments will be considered separately, showing how the departments link to the perceived situational sources of conflict with representative quotes from the transcripts given. Any brand names, references or identifiers have been removed in order to maintain participant anonymity.

Marketing

The marketing department was mentioned by 20 of the 29 key account managers interviewed and was referred to as a perceived departmental source of conflict 65 times across the 112 incidents described.

| Marketing | No. of References across incidents |
|------------------|---|
| Resources | 21 |
| Communication | 14 |
| People | 9 |
| Roles | 9 |
| Goals | 9 |
| Culture | 2 |
| Self Interest | 1 |
| TOTAL | 65 |

Table 5.4 Summary of the Number of ‘Marketing’ Incidents by Situation

The main reasons given were a lack of resources required for the key account manager to achieve their objectives, together with a lack of clear communication and the perception that those who involved themselves presented a barrier to the

achievement of their goals. The number of incidents relating to relationships with the marketing department is presented in table 5.4 by perceived situational source or the reason why, as shown in table 5.2. More than half are associated with the situational elements of resources and communication. A situation was described where the marketing department required non-existent data highlighting the issue of miscommunication:

“...from the marketing scene they were saying there is no market data to support it and of course then there wouldn't be because, because of the fact that there's, it's a completely new launch...” (Stuart, Incident No. 1, 27/01/2007)

Communication between the key account manager and an individual in the marketing department was also referred to as an issue:

“I think it's a communication issue, often either I or my opposite in the marketing department (customer marketing department) have not kept each other informed...” (Vincent, Incident No. 71, 05/02/2008)

As were clashes between sales and marketing objectives:

“I think it's caused by fear for marketing how it could potentially impact on their market share of their, value of the brand.” (Cliff, Incident No. 87, 22/01/2007)

Some key account managers wanted the business to be sales-led as opposed to market driven:

“...there's quite a few really. I think firstly there are conflicts between myself and marketing. I think ((sighs)), we see ourselves as a very much brand leaders and that

conflicts really with my own opinion that we should be a sales led organisation.” (Larry, Incident No. 80, 06/02/2008)

The key account managers’ relationship with marketing is crucial to achieving both customer and organisation objectives and with 65 references is perceived to be the greatest department source of conflict. In chapter 6 when the behaviours are presented together with the outcomes how important this is will become evident. The second most referred to department source of conflict was the senior management team.

Senior Management

The second most referred to perceived departmental source of conflict was the senior management team. In total, 15 of the respondents made 39 references to incidents of conflict described as having some association with senior management. The number of incidents described relating to the relationships with the senior management is presented in table 5.5 by perceived situational source.

| Senior Management | No. of References across incidents |
|--------------------------|---|
| Roles | 8 |
| Communication | 7 |
| People | 7 |
| Resources | 7 |
| Culture | 4 |
| Goals | 3 |
| Self Interest | 3 |
| TOTAL | 39 |

Table 5.5 Summary of the Number of ‘Senior Management’ Incidents by Situation

The table shows a balance across the perceived situational sources of conflict where the senior management team is perceived to be involved in many issues at a higher level – the perception being that the senior management team did not fully support the sales strategies, continually moving target and changing proposition. A situation was described where a proposal was not seriously considered by the senior management team:

“... having already promised it and I felt almost like I’d been cheated and lied to by the management team from them making this promise of, you know, if something is credible then it will be considered. I felt, the group felt and people that were key stakeholders who we’d shown it to who had no reason to doubt it thought it was credible, but for some reason ((clears throat)) it was felt not credible when it was actually put in front of the management team.”
(Peter, Incident No. 36, 11/10/2007)

Similarly, the key account managers noted how senior management getting into disagreements with them affected product development. Development plans were established across the marketing and sales functions of the organisation only to be blocked by senior management prior to implementation:

“So we got conflict management in terms of the Group Director for NPD and Innovations saying yes we want to move it forward and a clear decision and agreement was made but then senior management at a higher level, right up to CEO, blocked it. I think it was ineffective management, senior management on the marketing side of the business that created the situation” *(Stuart, Incident No. 2, 25/01/2007)*

The key account managers interviewed had the perception that senior management had different opposing positions or attitudes:

“It can come from the attitude of the most senior people in the organisation who set the tone. All that is changed overnight because of one change in the leadership of the organisation and one distinct and very obvious change in

the focus now of the organisation.” (Neil, Incident No. 10, 15/10/2007)

The perceived source conflict associated with senior management covers all situations, in many cases senior management being referred to because of the sales strategy or targets, that is to say the senior managers set the strategy which in many cases influences the relationships the key account managers have with the other departments. Again the conflict management behaviour associated with this departmental source of conflict will be presented in chapter 6.

Other Key Account Managers

Thirteen of the respondents described fellow team members as a perceived source of conflict with 32 references across the 112 incidents making it the third most perceived source of departmental conflict. More than a quarter of the incidents described in some way involved another team member. This will be presented further when the incidents are broken down in chapter 6. The number of incidents described relating to the relationships with other KAM team members is presented in table 5.6 by perceived situational source. Here, people are the highest referred to situational source of conflict followed by roles and goals.

| Other Key Account Managers | No. of References across incidents |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| People | 12 |
| Roles | 9 |
| Goals | 5 |
| Communication | 3 |
| Self Interest | 2 |
| Culture | 1 |
| Resources | 0 |
| TOTAL | 32 |

Table 5.6 Summary of the Number of ‘Other Key account managers’ Incidents by Situation

One noticeable difference in key account managers’ perception is a lack of the association of resources as a source of conflict within the team. Those interviewed

frequently mentioned competition for scarce resources based upon account priorities, the bigger account getting first choice. However, interestingly, they do not associate this conflict with the KAM team; instead, it is associated with the department holding the resource. Where there is competition for resources between one key account manager and another, the key account manager of a bigger account who carries more weight internally tends to get the resource allocation. This was widely perceived as a source of conflict and was a common theme throughout the interviews with the focus being on the team members rather than the actual resource:

“...with our biggest customer, obviously the business team manager is looking after the account controller on this one; rule one, it gets what it needs. I then have to go via my business team manager, explain the situation and get their involvement to then not go against but resolve the conflict and it comes back down to that peer group conflict, can I get what I need and you still get a win out of the situation...” (William, Incident No. 57, 01/02/2008)

It is frequently the team make-up or dynamic which influences the perceived conflict; in some cases, the key account managers simply did not get on with their colleagues or there is a perceived source of conflict where roles or responsibilities are obscure:

“This is very recent and it didn’t have to do with our, our corporate headquarters, it had to do with a colleague on the team... ...this one particular colleague I, I felt like he was, taking advantage of me in terms of... ((pause)) I tend to do more of the heavy analytical work to support business presentations and the request that he was making was a very simple one or just a very simple business call and instead of him taking on that task himself.” (Dean, Incident No. 111, 07/03/2008)

Re-allocation of account responsibilities after a re-organisation can also create barriers between key account managers if they are not all happy with their new accounts:

“I start getting some rumblings from a couple of the guys, not all of the team but a couple of the guys sort of not happy with some of the accounts that I’m picking up, not happy with some of the accounts they’d lost. Um ((clears throat)) eh and it was an interesting one actually I guess because it wasn’t direct conflict, it wasn’t a conflict face to face, it wasn’t someone coming to me saying “I’m not happy...” (Carl, Incident No. 32, 11/10/2007)

Another conflict perceived as coming from other key account managers was the situation where a colleague did not meet expectations in terms of responsibility and left another exposed:

“...one of my colleagues, um, unfortunately wasn’t as detailed in terms of filling that out and as a net result, um was exposed when their account came in to order it. That exposure meant that, um, there was more pressure then on other accounts to share their resource.” (Joseph, Incident No. 97, 07/02/2008)

All of the organisations who participated had teams of key account managers, not individuals working in isolation. The relationship between team members was therefore one of the closest the participants talked about. From table 5.6, the majority of the conflict within the team was perceived to be a result of people, role and goal issues. The next perceived departmental source of conflict was the finance department.

Finance

Eleven of the 29 key account managers referred to the finance department as a perceived source of conflict. The finance department was referred to 30 times in total across the incidents (table 5.7). The majority of these references were related to people, communication and resource allocation, this being due mainly to the allocation of budgets from the accounting or finance department. The number of incidents described relating to the relationships with the accounting or finance department is presented in table 5.7 by perceived situational source.

| Finance | No. of References across incidents |
|---------------|------------------------------------|
| People | 12 |
| Communication | 9 |
| Resources | 4 |
| Roles | 2 |
| Goals | 2 |
| Culture | 1 |
| Self Interest | 0 |
| TOTAL | 30 |

Table 5.7 Summary of the Number of 'Finance' Incidents by Situation

Accounts are often put 'on stop'⁵ by finance as terms were seemingly abused by customers. For example, one situation was described where an account was constantly put 'on stop' through lack of communication:

"I think it's from a finance perspective as well, communication's a big thing because, I'd had a situation whereby a relatively new account last year and we were constantly, they were constantly going over the credit limit and we would constantly put them on stop... the first I'd hear about it that it, being on stop was when customer services told me that we were, the order they'd placed were on hold... I think a lot of the time with the finance side of

⁵ An account put 'on stop' refers to an account with an overdue account payable or other finances owing which results in trading being ceased until the arrears are paid.

things it was a lack of understanding on my behalf and also on their behalf of the processes that we had to go through.”
(Larry, Incident No. 79, 06/02/2008)

Constantly trying to keep one step ahead of the accounting department in order to avoid any instances of conflict, combined with the perception of finance lacking information and motivation to act on the accounts behalf, caused perceived conflicts with the key account managers:

“We had our accounting people and they were, you know, flipping out. I tried to get ahead of them, you know, and just try, you know they, they have a good role in the company... sometimes the challenges, you know as much as possible I try to get ahead of it.” (Dean, Incident No. 110, 06/03/2008)

“This person managed a lot, manages a lot of the day to day financial accounts payable and accounts receivable details with my customers... .. in their, in their position, they’re not motivated to act proactive, take proactive actions rather to, um, resolve issues and they, um, they lack the need of detail that that position requires.” (Ruben, Incident No. 105, 06/03/2008)

The next most referred to perceived department source of conflict was production and planning.

Production and Planning

Conflicts arising with production and planning were mentioned by 11 of the respondents and referred to 22 times across the incidents, the issue primarily being one of communication around how the customer need is presented to the planners. The number of incidents described relating to the relationships with the production and planning department is presented in table 5.8 by perceived situational source. Again, communication and resource issues are the perceived main causes of conflict.

The production lines and planners need clear communication to deliver the account objectives but do not always have the required resource to achieve them.

| Production and Planning | No. of References across incidents |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Communication | 7 |
| Resources | 5 |
| People | 4 |
| Roles | 3 |
| Goals | 2 |
| Self Interest | 1 |
| Culture | 0 |
| TOTAL | 22 |

Table 5.8 Summary of the Number of ‘Production and Planning’ Incidents by Situation

A situation often described was how the bigger accounts get priority especially during periods of high demand such as product promotions. When the stock allocation is planned there are priorities and the perception from the less senior key account managers is that the bigger accounts always get priority leaving the managers of the smaller accounts to deal with stock shortages:

“I guess one is probably stock and supply issues. So if you look at the accounts I look after, there’s a pecking order within the, key accounts obviously. You know you’ve got your bigger ones coming down and my accounts sit at number five so just outside of the top four so obviously any time that there’s a call to be made on stock naturally it goes ... number one, number two, number three. By the time it gets to number five as a collective of accounts it then becomes very difficult to get your fair share if you like.” (William, Incident No. 56, 01/02/2008)

The key account managers interviewed also frequently found themselves in conflict situations with their production teams as they tried to get new ideas implemented:

“...and then there’s other conflict situations arrive whereby the factory won’t do it... From now on anything that’s new we want a ‘new’ flash on the product and the factory will say “We’re not doing that because it’s an extra two people to stick it on and it’s hassle and it’s time, it slows up the line.” I mean these guys run into loads of conflict with the factories all the time.” (Carlos, Incident No. 51, 15/10/2007)

Again, priority situations are also an issue, where the key account manager could only get what the factory could make and had to argue his case to get the required allocation of stock:

“I guess the obvious one which is fairly day to day is where you battle for priority on a line, you know, for whatever reason, you know, can only make one out of two products that particular day.” (Gerald, Incident No.4, 15/02/2007)

The least referred to department sources of conflict were NPD / technical, supply chain, customer services, IT and HR.

NPD / Technical, Supply Chain, Customer Services, IT and HR

NPD / technical, supply chain, customer services, IT and HR were also mentioned but only in a very small number of incidents with only 22 references out of a total of 210 different references to departmental sources of conflict. The references to NPD and technical related to the marketing department and product development while the customer services issues related to the production and planning issues experienced by the key account manager, where the customer did not get what the customer ordered. These situational sources of conflict will be referred to later and considered as part of the overall perception of conflict by department in the organisation.

In summary, considering the departmental sources of conflict, the key account managers interviewed described every department as a potential source of conflict. Noticeably, those with the highest number of incidents were those working closest to the KAM teams: marketing, senior management, other key account managers, finance and production.

Surprisingly, one other perceived location of conflict frequently referred to as having an influence on the internal conflicts, was the customer.

The Customer

The research revealed that the external relationship with the customer was perceived to have an influence on the internal departmental sources of conflict. Every incident described (112) involved the customer in at least one aspect and all of those interviewed talked of the customers' demands and how these are represented within the organisation. These key account managers are salespeople; they act as the customer advocate within the organisation and therefore continually work to represent the customers' needs. Every department source of conflict occurs because the key account managers perceive barriers to achieving their goals; these goals relate specifically to the customer and the balance the key account managers have to strike between customer advocacy and their selling orientation.

Being close to the customer could have created the impression that the key account managers' attention to the business objectives was reduced and that they had become too customer oriented:

“So I find myself in a conflict situation there between trying to recognise the customer because the customer is going to be the one who is going to help sell this product but also mindful that I work for an organisation that clearly wants its name to be broadcast in the right places. That’s one conflict scenario.” (David, Incident No. 24, 13/02/1007)

Customer pressure could affect the behaviour of the key account manager within the organisation where they react to situations the customer creates:

“Conflict really arises whereby we’re put under pressure-, or I’m put under pressure, by the customer because they will want everything last minute because especially when they’re retailers, they’re getting poorer and poorer at long term planning, they’re a lot more knee jerk and because we haven’t got as many people everything’s a lot more, we’re more reactive than proactive.” (Carlos, Incident No. 51, 15/10/2007)

Customer demands and expectations may not fit with corporate objectives, forcing the key account manager to make demands within the organisation which may not match the company objectives:

“The, the, if you’re talking about internally then within the internal situation there are needs, demands in most cases from the accounts for particular activity, particular support that don’t fit with company strategy.” (Peter, Incident No. 33, 11/10/2007)

“I think a lot of conflict is caused by expectations so it’s to do with um either the customer expectations are so high that they, that your organisation can’t deliver against them... internally the expectations of what you can deliver to your customer are higher and therefore you then get at mismatch because you can’t deliver that through the customer.” (Joseph, Incident No. 96, 07/02/2008)

Clearly the customer does play an important role, being the focus of the key account manager’s activity in order to meet the sales objectives. In the next section, the

findings associated with the perceived situational sources of conflict are presented; i.e., more about why conflicts occur.

5.2.2 Situational Sources of Conflict – The Role of the Micro Environment

From the 29 interviews, the number of participants who referenced each of the higher order categories for the situational sources or root causes of conflict is presented in table 5.9. Following the table the findings move on to present a number of representative quotations from the transcripts which demonstrate the key account managers' accounts of what intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict looks like to them. (Any brand names, references or identifiers have been removed in order to maintain participant anonymity). These incidents of conflict are also presented in more detail in chapter 6 and a synopsis of each of the 112 incidents from which the tables in this chapter are derived is presented in appendix G. The summary tables presented below will be referred to throughout this section.

| Category | Sub-categories | No. of Respondents Referencing | No. of References from the Incidents |
|--|----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Situational Sources of Conflict</i> | <i>Communication</i> | 25 | 50 |
| | <i>People</i> | 22 | 38 |
| | <i>Resources</i> | 21 | 53 |
| | <i>Roles</i> | 18 | 33 |
| | <i>Goals</i> | 11 | 21 |
| | <i>Self Interest</i> | 6 | 7 |
| | <i>Culture</i> | 5 | 8 |
| | <i>TOTALS</i> | <i>N/A</i> | 210 |

Table 5.9 Summary of References to the Situational Sources of Conflict

Seven higher-order categories relating to the perceived situational sources or causes of conflict were identified: communication, people, resources, roles, goals, self interest and culture. The findings are presented in order of their frequency of referral, see table 5.9. These have been labelled as situational sources of conflict since they relate to the organisational micro environment in which the key account managers operate; i.e., the situational source of conflict is a condition of the organisation. In a

similar way to the previous section, each perceived source of situational conflict is presented in relation to the departmental sources of conflict

Communication

Communication, miscommunication or communication style was mentioned at least once by 25 of the 29 respondents and described as a major contributing factor 50 times across the 112 incidents described. The way in which the customer message or sales strategies are communicated within the organisation was identified as a source of conflict. Conflict arising from communication is perceived to occur across all of the internal relationships mostly with marketing. A summary of the number of incidents referring to communication as a situational source is presented by department in table 5.10.

| Communication | No. of References across incidents |
|-------------------------|---|
| Marketing | 14 |
| Finance | 9 |
| Senior Management | 7 |
| Production and Planning | 7 |
| NPD and Technical | 5 |
| Key account managers | 3 |
| Customer Services | 2 |
| Supply Chain | 2 |
| HR | 1 |
| TOTAL | 50 |

Table 5.10 Summary of the Number of ‘Communication’ Incidents by Relationship

The table shows that the highest number of conflict incidents referring to communication was linked to the relationships with the marketing department, followed by finance, senior management, production and NPD.

The key account managers who referred to communication felt their message was not getting to other departments, preventing them from achieving their objectives. The situational source of conflict, communication, also includes miscommunication and

lack of understanding where the key account manager's message is either not getting across or is misrepresented:

"I think conflict for me, it starts with miscommunication, I think this is a key element of it... I think, generally I've seen conflict come through, messages not being clear..."
(Robert, Incident No. 83, 27/02/2008)

Another view which represents a lack of communication is a lack of understanding from other departments as to what the sales objectives are:

"I guess cross-functionally within the business as well people who don't understand what you're trying to do as well. So you can get, you can get conflict caused by lack of understanding, so I think it can be an element of ignorance or lack of understanding..." (Cliff, Incident No. 87, 22/01/2008)

Communication issues also occurred between the key account manager and the internal groups they have to deal with, most often between marketing and the KAM teams:

"I sometimes have conflicts with, with brands who don't truly understand how the retail customers operate..."
(Rose, Incident No. 99, 06/03/2008)

"... you've got a big sales department and you've got a big marketing department but I don't think we have very good lines of communication between the two..." (Larry, Incident No. 81, 06/02/2008)

There was also the issue of how things were communicated; i.e., were the right messages getting across, sometimes also resulting in 'Chinese whispers'.

“Everyone has their say and Chinese whispers make everything much worse than it ever is and you have to deal with that all the time... it becomes challenging to manage the flow of communication when everyone’s got a slightly different take, a slightly different objective, a slightly different view.” (Kenny, Incident No. 91, 07/02/2008)

Considering communication as a perceived situational source of conflict, there was also reference to how the key account management team was perceived within the organisation and whether or not the other teams within the organisation had a clear understanding of the sales function and what was required:

“...I strongly felt as an individual that there was no recognition of what the national account group was contributing to the business to enable them to do what they wanted to...” (Kevin, Incident No. 39, 11/10/2007)

or of messages simply not getting through:

“...you feel like you’re just banging your head against a brick wall with them sometimes.” (Peter, Incident No. 34, 11/10/2007)

Communication issues with senior management also occurred, where for instance decisions seemed to be made without consideration for the business objectives:

“...management decision generates the conflict because they’re not actually listening to what the business needs, or in my opinion they weren’t listening to what the business needs and so that causes the, the conflict in the first place... In my opinion they weren’t listening to what the business needs and so that causes the, the conflict in the first place...” (Kevin, Incident No. 39, 11/10/2007)

Communication between departments was not always as clear as it should have been, again leaving team members unsure of what needed to be done to achieve their objectives:

“I guess the planning side of it and the people that are making the decisions or designing the activity not speaking to us first or being able to understand how, you know, it actually gets executed within an account, what they can and can’t do and I think that’s one of the biggest, biggest problems, where you are trying to convey situations and scenarios where the people internally don’t have an understanding of how the trade and business works.”
(Peter, Incident No. 34, 11/10/2007)

“I think, um, generally I’ve seen conflict come through, um, messages not being clear...” (Robert, Incident No. 83, 27/02/2008)

Additionally there was the lack of communication regarding account issues which originated in another department, typically finance:

“It shouldn’t be me finding out from a customer that we’ve done a stop before I find out from our own finance department, somebody internally who only sits two floors down from me.” (Larry, Incident No. 79, 06/02/2008)

After communication, the second most referred to source of conflict was the people involved; not just how they communicated, but who they were, the individuals themselves and the way they act within the organisation being the perceived source of conflict.

People

People within the organisation have their own ways of doing things, individual styles and personalities which can create a perceived negative view of sales resulting in conflict. From the perspective of those interviewed, sometimes people just do not get on, have personality clashes or other personal issues which prevent open communication and create conflicts. Twenty-two of the key account managers referred to people or other individuals within the organisation as being a source of conflict and people issues were referred to 38 times across the 112 incidents described. These are summarised in table 5.11.

| People | No. of References across incidents |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Key account managers | 12 |
| Marketing | 9 |
| Senior Management | 7 |
| Production and Planning | 5 |
| Finance | 4 |
| NPD and Technical | 1 |
| Supply Chain | 0 |
| TOTAL | 38 |

Table 5.11 Summary of the Number of 'People' Incidents by Relationship

Taking other individuals as a source of conflict the closest source and most referred to are the other KAM team members, they all seemed to be in some kind of competition to best meet their customer's needs by getting all they could for themselves:

"...Conflict generally comes from, what other national account managers are doing with their, with their business..." (Robert, Incident No. 84, 27/02/2008)

Certain behavioural styles of individuals in the organisation and the risks they are prepared to take were referred to, suggesting those who may be more flexible and break the rules may be easier to deal with than those who strictly follow the rules:

“The individual has a, a huge part, even if an individual is following through on, their objections based on corporate guidelines, depending on the individual, it would be how rigidly those corporate guidelines where interpreted, whether they sometimes want to break the rules. So I would say the individual has a, a huge say um in how, how their conflict is, is dealt with. Potentially there could be, it goes back to personality, be an objection to you as an individual and maybe a lack of trust or maybe experience of something you’ve done before from a sales perspective.”
(Cliff, Incident No. 89, 22/01/2008)

Expanding on this further to cover a similar subject, that of how open minded to a suggestion an individual may be, the key account managers perceived some people to be less open minded and likely to agree with the sales or customer viewpoint:

“...if somebody’s naturally, you know, more, more narrow minded you’re going to struggle because whatever you say they’re going to be more closed to what you’re, you’re trying to achieve.” (Cliff, Incident No. 89, 22/01/2008)

Other behaviours described included the passion and enthusiasm others have for the business, suggesting some have less enthusiasm in areas where they have no responsibility. From the key account managers’ perspective, that often meant less enthusiasm for the sales strategies:

“So the people that I’m asking for their support don’t share the same, may not share the same passion and enthusiasm and may not be their goal set to deliver...” (Joseph, Incident No. 94, 07/02/2008)

“I expect to get conflict, so...((deep sigh)) Because it’s not an, it’s not an idyllic world so you’re always going to get

different peoples', you know people are different, people see things differently so ((pause)) it's inevitable, cause they're not interested..." (Anna, Incident No. 65, 01/02/2008)

Then there was the perception of people just putting up barriers for the sake of it, that not all the people in the organisation were being entirely reasonable:

"...there was conflict with the people who looked after the credit control, that was partly because they were, they were just, well in my eyes just completely unreasonable, horrible people who you know just... I talked about people who, who, who enjoyed a fight..." (Neil, Incident No. 7, 30/01/2007)

"...you go in with a mindset of a technical person who wants everything perfect because that's the type of person they are..." (Gerald, Incident No. 6, 15/02/2007)

"... well quite simply people, people have different, different perception of, have a different perception of what you're trying to deliver and are just unreasonable about it..." (Joseph, Incident No. 94, 07/02/2008)

Or in more extreme cases, people are just not liked or were perceived to be dishonest:

"...God you are too self-focused and obsessed and I don't like working with you..." (Kevin, Incident No. 38, 11/10/2007)

*"...purely from an intuition basis but it was borne out to be right, he couldn't do the job, he'd lied on his CV, he was aggressive, he was confrontational, he was an absolute ****, to be honest and that wasn't just my opinion, that*

was everybody's opinion and even the people who employed him." (Carlos, Incident No. 49, 15/10/2008)

Issues relating to communication and people were mentioned by more of the respondents. However, issues relating to resources were referred to in 53 of the incidents making it the most common situational source of conflict in this study. This resource conflict refers to the lack of resources or support for the KAM team which are required to meet the expectations of their customers.

Resources

Key account managers are not always seen as representing their own organisation's needs; instead, they can be seen as having a primary concern for their customers' needs. They are often seen by others in their organisation as those who make life difficult, who make unreasonable demands and go against the capabilities of the organisation. It is not always clear to all departments what the sales strategy is and how this fits with their goals and roles. Twenty-one of the key account managers interviewed perceived a lack of resource to be a source of conflict and this is reflected in the incidents described. A summary of the number of incidents referring to resource as a situational source is presented by department in table 5.12.

| Resources | No. of References across incidents |
|-------------------------|---|
| Marketing | 21 |
| Finance | 12 |
| Senior Management | 7 |
| NPD and Technical | 7 |
| Production and Planning | 4 |
| Supply Chain | 2 |
| Key account managers | 0 |
| TOTAL | 53 |

Table 5.12 Summary of the Number of 'Resource' Incidents by Relationship

When it comes to resources, marketing and finance are mentioned the most. In order to meet customer requirements, the key account manager is constantly in competition for scarce resources which are required to meet their sales objectives. It is the pursuit

of these resources which is widely perceived as a situational source of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. Resources may relate to product development or product changes which the customer or market demands. Not being able to deliver against these demands was discussed in the context of funds or resources not being available to achieve the objective. This is where resource is linked to marketing as mentioned here:

“Look, we’re missing a major opportunity here because the share in sales is moving to this pack format and we are not in this pack format, we need it, we can’t do something about it...” (Kevin, Incident No. 38, 11/10/2007)

Lack of resources relating to the finance department as a source of conflict was frequently referenced where there was a perceived under-allocation of financial resource to achieve the account objectives:

“...there’s no budget to do anything and so for nearly two years we just trundled along, basically doing nothing with the accounts and it was like being in a, in a backwater.” (Kevin, Incident No. 37, 11/10/2007)

“What is an issue and what does get me, angry is if somebody took, had taken that money away and I couldn’t achieve my objective as part of my account plan for yearend purely because the budget was pulled, that would, that would annoy me intensely.” (Kevin, Incident No.37, 11/10, 2007)

Also referred to was the lack of field sales support:

“I guess the second area, I see... ...as conflict is ((slight pause)) a field sales resource. We’ve got a finite field sales resource and we’ve got a finite number of customers, but however, 40 people into 4,500 stores doesn’t go. It’s how

do you then balance off what you need, as a field resource, against what, what your peer group needs.” (William, Incident No. 58, 01/02/2008)

In general, resources are referred to as an organisational issue; i.e., the support is just not there to meet the customer’s requirements. This general lack of resource was also frequently referenced:

“I think a lot of conflict is caused by expectations so it’s to do with either the customer expectations are so high that they, that your organisation can’t deliver against them because they don’t have the resources...” (Joseph, Incident No. 94, 07/02/2008)

“...you get to the situation where you’re not getting told things; decisions are being made about your business without your knowledge...” (Paul, Incident No. 19, 05/02/2007)

“... because the business has an attitude and a resource level that says, “Let’s just get through today. Let’s just get through today,”” (Gerald, Incident No. 4, 15/02/2007)

“I think eh one of the main causes of conflict in our organisation at the minute is a lack of resource, um, we’ve got, we’ve downsized dramatically as a business whereby we had a marketing department of say 15/16 people we’ve now got three.” (Carlos, Incident No. 51, 15/10/2007)

The perception of conflict within the organisation is also closely related to the individuals involved and was referred to as person or people related, with links to their goals and roles. Each is now presented separately.

Roles

The next situational source of conflict is roles; i.e., the jobs that other individuals do. Other departments such as marketing, finance and production could have their own objectives and reporting structures which might not be aligned with the sales strategy, meaning that members of other teams might have roles which may be perceived to hinder the sales process. A summary of the number of incidents referring to roles as a situational source is presented by department in table 5.13.

| Roles | No. of References across incidents |
|-------------------------|---|
| Marketing | 9 |
| Key account managers | 9 |
| Senior Management | 8 |
| Production and Planning | 3 |
| Finance | 2 |
| NPD and Technical | 1 |
| Customer Services | 1 |
| Supply Chain | 0 |
| TOTAL | 33 |

Table 5.13 Summary of the Number of 'role' Incidents by Relationship

Role-related conflict was referred to by 18 of the 29 key account managers interviewed and referenced 33 times across the 112 incidents. The most frequent clashes were between the key account managers and the marketing department; between key account managers and other key account managers; and between key account managers and senior managers. This is reflected in the marketing department being the most referred to departmental source of conflict, the perceived reason why being the different roles the marketing department have; i.e., less focus on the specific customer need and more on the general market opportunity. In terms of accountability and the roles non-sales people carry out within the organisation, a perception of conflict between the key account manager and another individual or group of individuals who have different lines of reporting can often arise:

“We’d almost been parked down a side street and it made us feel, undervalued if you like and so therefore you started to get conflict if people are asking you to do things that weren’t directly your responsibility, you tend to not do them or passed them off or refused to do them.” (Kevin, Incident No. 38, 11/10/2007)

Members of other teams can often stick to their own areas of responsibility and their own roles not wanting to take on extra responsibilities for the key account manager:

“So conflict internally I think comes from a narrow... often comes from a narrow-minded approach, people are only concerned about their particular side or element of the business, don’t necessarily appreciate other people’s... I think if you ask seven people in seven different departments they’d all say that their department is the most important.” (David, Incident No. 23, 13/02/2007)

In a marketing context this could occur when ideas were developed without sales input:

“If they feel that their role, if they’re in control of their own destiny within their role then they like to keep it very much, closed and that’s when you get some of the ideas that pop up regarding stupid new products and, and you just wonder how the hell have they got through that. Come and speak to someone in sales who will point you in the right direction ((laughs)).” (Larry, Incident No. 80, 06/02/2008)

While, in many cases, the decision process did not take into account the needs of the customer:

“...we’ve seen it quite a lot where we’ve had people in positions who are making decisions that haven’t worked in the trade and it’s sort of, that creates a bit of, animosity

because they're trying to do something but you know without the trade support we can't deliver it within an FMCG company and you tend to see um decisions being made where they've got absolutely no regard or even any concern or consideration for the actual trade partner we're trying to work with..." (Peter, Incident No. 36, 11/10/2007)

What is a priority for one may not be for another:

"I couldn't hope to understand somebody else's job role and to the same degree know what their job priorities are, so on their priorities my request might be number 25 but to me it's number one." (William, Incident No. 59, 01/02/2008)

The next most referred to perceived situational source of conflict within the organisation which relates more specifically to the people involved is that of goals or objectives and is linked closely to that of roles.

Goals

Members of different teams within the organisation have very different roles which could lead to the perception of internal conflict.

| Goals | No. of References across incidents |
|-------------------------|---|
| Marketing | 9 |
| Key account managers | 5 |
| Senior Management | 3 |
| Finance | 2 |
| Production and Planning | 2 |
| NPD and Technical | 0 |
| Supply Chain | 0 |
| TOTAL | 21 |

Table 5.14 Summary of the Number of 'Goal' Incidents by Relationship

With these different roles came different objectives which might not fit closely to the sales objectives and, from the key account managers' perspective, present a barrier to achieving their goals. A summary of the number of incidents referring to goals as a situational source is presented by department in table 5.14. Eleven of those interviewed referenced goal related conflict 21 times across the incidents. Conflict could occur within the organisation as a direct result of misaligned performance measures and objectives, between the key account manager and another individual or group of individuals:

"I think conflict is clearly a mismatch between your own goals and that of, your colleagues or your organisations and typically your own goals would be customer led..."
(Joseph, Incident No. 94, 07/02/2008)

"Yeah I think, I think for me it's just, it's just eh a simple as when I come across another group or individual that maybe doesn't quite see that goal, that, what I'm trying to achieve um and offer the support I need to achieve it..."
(Carl, Incident No. 30, 11/10/2007)

"... you know the biggest conflicts there are is, is where you're, you, you don't have everybody working towards the same goal or not understanding where you're ultimately trying to get to as an organisation." (Rose, Incident No. 101, 06/03/2008)

"I guess the obvious one which is fairly day to day is where you battle for priority on a line, you know, for whatever reason, you know, can only make one out of two products that particular day." (Gerald, Incident No. 5, 15/02/2007)

The different objectives could also refer to different agendas, as referred to here:

“...different agenda, different...Yeah. Different people have different agendas, um, not all working on, from the same kind of hymn sheet as it were.” (Anna, Incident No. 66, 01/02/2008)

Related to goals and roles is another emergent concept, that of self interest, of conflict arising as individuals pursue their own goals or roles selfishly one step beyond just carrying out their duties.

Self Interest

To put self interest into context:

“I do believe that in, reaching a solution internally it gives me the respect that I need internally with colleagues that fact that I’m used to dealing with conflict management but also it then holds, holds true with the, with the retailer that I’ve not let the retailer down and actually I’m working with the retailer so it gives me more opportunities. I would say I’m extremely confident and delighted at the outcomes, in my view.” (Stuart, Incident No. 2, 25/01/2007)

As one key account manager mentioned, the best possible outcome was required in order to gain internal and external respect; i.e., maintain both selling and customer orientation. He wanted his customer to perceive him as a strong advocate internally and at the same time command respect for achieving this internally.

Although not referred to as much as the other situation sources, self interest was mentioned by six of those interviewed and referred to seven times across the incidents. A summary of the number of incidents referring to self interest as a situational source is presented by department in table 5.15. Although referred to less than the other sources, as an emergent theme this was seen as something which clearly influences behaviour and is included to help with the discussion and for

reference in chapter 6. To further emphasise this situational source, here one key account manager talks of someone ‘banging their drum’ no matter what the consequence was:

“...at various meetings and somebody will bang the drum for their own ends rather than what’s good for the business...” (Kevin, Incident No. 39, 11/10/2007)

| Self Interest | No. of References across incidents |
|-------------------------|---|
| Senior Management | 3 |
| Key account managers | 2 |
| Marketing | 1 |
| Production and Planning | 1 |
| Finance | 0 |
| NPD and Technical | 0 |
| Supply Chain | 0 |
| TOTAL | 7 |

Table 5.15 Summary of the Number of ‘Self Interest’ Incidents by Relationship

There were also instances of there being an instigator of conflict in order to ruffle feathers and get things moving, someone acting as the ‘devil’s advocate’ to stimulate change:

“To different levels, sometimes I can cause that conflict in my own mind. So I can listen to a presentation and think, That was inept, too late, not detailed enough, didn’t consider factors X, Y and Z, if I’m in the mood, or have the time, can create that conflict out of nothing.” (Gerald, Incident No. 4, 15/02/2007)

As for the key account managers interviewed, self interest is about the selfish pursuit of one’s own whims without real consideration for roles or goals, in some cases stimulating conflict just for the sake of it in order to be perceived as a good conflict manager.

Finally there is the role of structure and culture as a perceived situational source of conflict.

Structure and Culture

A summary of the number of incidents referring to structure and culture as a situational source is presented by department in table 5.16. Structure and culture were mentioned by five of the key account managers eight times across the 112 incidents, a clear perceived source of conflict.

| Structure and Culture | No. of References across incidents |
|------------------------------|---|
| Senior Management | 4 |
| Marketing | 2 |
| Key account managers | 1 |
| Finance | 1 |
| Production and Planning | 0 |
| NPD and Technical | 0 |
| Supply Chain | 0 |
| TOTAL | 8 |

Table 5.16 Summary of the Number of ‘Structure and Culture’ Incidents by Relationship

This perception links more closely to senior management with half of the incidents referencing structure and culture involving the senior management team relating to a perceived misalignment of corporate strategy:

“I think, sometimes you feel as if you’re caught between the Devil and the deep blue sea, for want of a better expression. You’re trying to do what’s best for the company and really you’re trying to do what you can for your customer but if you’re constantly having to question, badger, query your own internal organisation, I think it actually probably raises doubt in your own mind as to

whether what's being done is being done correctly."

(David Incident No. 24, 13/02/2007)

There is also the issue of how policy is perceived:

"I also think that, you know, in many ways, you know this, a lot of my time, you know, is addressing a lot of these, quote/unquote inflexible type policies." (Dean, Incident No.

110, 06/03/2008)

However, when discussed, these perceived sources were not referred in isolation, for many of the incidents described using the CIT, multiple sources were described in many conflict situations, each conflict having a unique composition. Only 112 incidents were described yet there were 210 references in total to the different sources of conflict, meaning each incident had a composition of at least one situational source and one departmental source.

5.2.3 Conflict Composition

One feature of the perceived nature of organisational conflict presented by the key account managers interviewed which became apparent through the presentation of the findings is that of conflict composition.

| Departmental Sources of Conflict | No. of Incidents Referencing |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Marketing and NPD | 3 |
| Finance and Marketing | 2 |
| Finance and Senior Management | 2 |
| Senior management, Production and Supply Chain | 1 |
| Production and Senior Management | 1 |
| Customer and Planning | 1 |
| Planning and NPD | 1 |
| Marketing and Senior Management | 1 |
| Marketing and Supply Chain | 1 |
| Total | 13 |

Table 5.17 Summary of References to Multiple Departmental Sources of Conflict

Table 5.3 shows 210 references to the different sources of conflict. This is due to the fact that more than one of the sources can be mentioned in any one of the 112 incidents described. Table 5.17 expands this and presents the combinations of sources of conflict by departmental source of conflict. For 13 of the 112 incidents described, the conflict being described had a perceived departmental source in more than one department. This situation was described by 11 of the participating account managers across all seven of the organisations. This can occur where the resource allocation is spread across two departments: for example, new product development and marketing. Marketing and senior management occur most frequently in conjunction with another perceived departmental source. Similarly, table 5.18 summarises the incidents of conflict described as having more than one perceived situational source.

| Situational Sources of Conflict | No. of Incidents |
|--|-------------------------|
| Resources and Communication | 12 |
| People and Roles | 7 |
| Communication and People | 6 |
| Resources and People | 4 |
| Goals, Roles and Communication | 4 |
| Goals and Roles | 4 |
| People, Goals and Roles | 4 |
| Roles and Communication | 3 |
| Roles and Culture | 2 |
| Resources, Culture and People | 2 |
| People and Self Interest | 2 |
| People, Goals, Roles and Self Interest | 2 |
| Roles and Self Interest | 2 |
| Communication, Roles and People | 2 |
| Resources, Roles and Goals | 2 |
| Resources and Culture | 2 |
| Resources and Goals | 1 |
| Communication and Self Interest | 1 |
| Resources, Communication and People | 1 |
| Resources and Roles | 1 |
| Communication, Resources and Culture | 1 |
| Goals and Self Interest | 1 |
| People and Goals | 1 |
| TOTAL | 67 |

Table 5.18 Summary of References to Multiple Situational Sources of Conflict

Sixty-seven of the incidents described had more than one perceived situational source of conflict and this situation was described by 26 of the 29 key account managers interviewed, many describing more than one incident with multiple perceived sources,

departmental and situational. Each conflict situation is unique and has a unique composition in terms of the perceived source. Six of those interviewed referred to multiple situational and departmental sources of conflict in seven specific incidents. The table shows that more than half of the 112 incidents described were perceived to have a multiple situational sources; however, only 10% had multiple departmental sources. These tables demonstrate how conflict is perceived by the key account manager in a very complex way being referred to in the same way across all seven participating organisations both in the U.K. and U.S.

Finally before moving on to the consequences of conflict within the organisation, this quote from one of the key account managers wraps all the sources into one, the business process,

“It’s hard enough dealing with the account without having to deal with all the other internal barriers that you perceive that shouldn’t really be there but for one of the several reasons I gave you are, which in essence is just a pretty simple and logical business process and that’s where I get, or that’s where I perceive the majority of my own internal conflicts to arise.” (Gerald, Incident No. 6, 15/02/2007)

In the next section the findings presents the key account managers’ perceptions of the consequences of these complex, unique incidents of conflict within the organisation.

5.2.4 Consequences of Conflict

Having explored the key account managers’ perception of conflict within the organisation and presenting the findings associated with the perceived departmental and situational sources of conflict the next emergent category relates to the perceived consequences of these conflicts within the organisation. Here the findings are presented under the three higher order categories of frustration, motivation and competition while considering whether the key account managers involved viewed conflict as a good or bad thing. In this section the relationship between the sources of

conflict and the consequence becomes apparent; each of the sources of conflict previously presented can have a number of consequences and be viewed both positively and negatively. Table 5.19 summarises these findings. It is noteworthy that one consequence, frustration, was referred to in almost every incident described (in 105 of 112 incidents).

| Category | Sub-categories | No. of Respondents Referencing | No. of Incidents |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Consequences of Conflict</i> | <i>Conflict is Good</i> | 16 | 79 |
| | <i>Conflict is Bad</i> | 13 | 33 |
| | <i>Frustration</i> | 29 | 105 |
| | <i>Competition</i> | 9 | 10 |
| | <i>Motivation</i> | 12 | 16 |

Table 5.19 Summary of References to the Consequences of Conflict

The CIT questions did not ask whether or not the key account managers viewed conflict as a good or bad thing within the organisation; instead, they were asked what they felt the consequences of the incident described were. However, some did describe how they saw conflict in terms of being a good or bad thing; interestingly, the perception was not always that conflict was a bad thing. Even though they were not directly asked, 16 of the key account managers saw conflict as a good thing with rather fewer, 13, seeing it as a bad thing. Although 69 of the incidents were described as having a positive outcome, 79 incidents included references to the positive impact of the conflict while only 33 of the 49 incidents which had a negative outcome were viewed negatively. Therefore, some of the negative experiences were viewed retrospectively as being a good thing.

Conflict is not all Bad

When considering their perception of the consequences of conflict within the organisation, the overwhelming response from the participating key account managers was negative, expressing frustration, increased competitive, angry behaviour and demotivation to the point of wanting to change job. However, 16 of the key account

managers interviewed described dealing with internal conflict as a challenge, a process from which they developed and learned so as not experience the same issues again. In the next section both positive and negative incidents are described, illustrating that a certain amount of conflict can be a good thing:

“I actually get a buzz out of it, to be honest. It doesn’t bother me at all, I quite like being in that kind of situation, and for me it’s all about building relationships with people and it’s networking together.” (Carlos, Incident No. 50, 15/10/2007)

The challenge of having to deal with the conflicts and the learning process contribute to the positive perception of conflict within the organisation.

Challenging

Even the very negatively perceived frustration presents a challenge and meeting the challenge can be rewarding:

“Yeh and I think from a personal point of view I, I went through a period of um, a period of high at the time because it was a challenge.” (Peter, Incident No. 33, 11/10/2007)

“Um, it can be mixed. Frustrating, um, but on the flip side you always know there’s going to be that frustration so in some ways it represents a challenge as well as to how you overcome that.” (Cliff, Incident No. 87, 22/01/2008)

“But you know you are well paid to do a job and the nature of the job is there’s some things you don’t like doing and there’s some things you love doing and

normally the things you don't like doing are the ones that take up more time so you have to get on with it." (Kenny, Incident No. 93, 07/02/2007)

There is also the challenge and the potential reward:

"Yeah, it was, it, it was a tough challenge but one I felt, you know it was an achievable challenge, it was a realistically achievable one particularly as I felt once we'd landed the result it was a, we had a strong proposition and a strong case to take forward that had a very strong business benefit so it was ((sigh)), it was one where I felt confident and in the, it, it sort of, in the right, eh the right zone to, to achieve it. Um so it was one I felt pretty positive about. I don't sit, sit on it and keep objecting to it with the customer, let's step up the plate, challenge it internally and push it as hard as we can. Even if we don't resolve it then at least... with the customer and say look we have done everything we possibly can as a business and this is why we can't do it." (Cliff, Incident No. 87, 22/01/2007)

Actually managing the conflict can present a learning opportunity:

"So I've got two kind of views on it. Conflict, it's time consuming and sometimes unnecessary but also it's a great learning piece as well." (Jane, Incident No. 74, 06/02/2008)

Although conflict was perceived to be a positive part of their organisational life when asked about how the conflict in the organisation they were describing made them feel, in almost every incident the feeling was one of frustration and apart from the challenge it was viewed as wholly negative.

Conflict as a Bad Thing

Thirteen of the key account managers interviewed expressed a view that conflict was a bad thing and this expression was repeated 33 times over the 112 incidents described. Having to deal with confrontation in the workplace being seen as a bad thing:

“...and you know, it’s not nice sometimes when you get confrontational with people and sometimes you have to, and you know it’s not pleasant in any working environment if you’ve got a lot of confrontation.”
(Wendy, Incident No. 47, 15/10/2007)

The coding process identified three higher order categories covering the negative consequences of conflict, frustration, increased competitive behaviour (competition) and de-motivation (motivation). Although the wholly negative perception was only expressed by 13 of the interviewees, all 29 discussed the frustration they felt at having to deal with instances of conflict within the organisation.

Frustration

The overwhelming emotional response to conflict within the organisation was a feeling of frustration at having to deal with issues which the key account managers perceived to be unnecessary, predominantly due to the lack of communication as presented earlier. As already stated, this frustration is not always perceived as a bad thing, it stimulates some to perform and improve communications, to engage other departments and work towards customer and organisation focused solutions. However, continued frustration and competition wears the key account manager down and reduces enthusiasm for their role. When asked how dealing with incidents of conflict within the organisation made the key account managers feel, the response was overwhelmingly negative:

*“...just a real frustration, does that answer the question..?
...just frustrated I think was probably the key feeling. It was
just frustration in the fact that again to my mind there was
a simple conclusion, a simple solution which was just
deliver the stock, yeah?” (Carl, Incident N. 31,
11/10/2007)*

Frustration through perceived lack of involvement:

*“And I think you automatically hit back and become
negative and frustrated towards the individual, a group of
individuals that have done that because you’ve not been
included, it’s almost sort of, you know, like I’m not in your
gang, you know, why, why haven’t you spoken to us first?”
(Peter, Incident No. 35, 11/10/2007)*

Some of this frustration was rooted in the relationship with the customer, in not being able to meet the demands through lack of resources:

*“... it was very frustrating when you were talking to your
buyer because your buyer was looking for investment and
you're trying to palm it off to say "Oh at the moment, you
know, we've just gone through a restructure..."” (Kevin,
Incident No. 38, 11/10/2007)*

*“Well this is happening, this is happening and this is
happening, why we can't do it?” and just getting a “No,
no, no. No, no, no can't, can't do it”. So I suppose that’s
where the biggest source of frustration is, which you know
internally leads, leads to a bit of conflict.” (Peter, Incident
No. 35, 11/10/2007)*

Alternatively the frustration comes from a perceived lack of understanding within the organisation about how the sales relationships work which once again links back to communication issues:

“I think, generally it comes with, it’s more of a frustration that would lead onto conflict, where you are trying to convey situations/scenarios where the people internally don’t have an understanding of how the trade and business works. It’s frustrating is really the key...I mean you, you get a little bit angry with it. You get disappointed because a lot of the time, you know, it’s good um activity that’s been put in place but I think mainly it’s just general frustration and I think...when those instances have actually happened in the past it’s, it’s been, you feel like you’re just sort of banging your head against a brick wall and when the next one comes along you think well the same problem’s going to happen again, you don’t learn from it. So it’s, it’s sort of frustration more than anything else.” (Peter, Incident No. 36, 11/10/2007)

“Lack of communication, which is the overriding factor of why most people get frustrated in our business...” (Paul, Incident No. 20, 05/02/2007)

Often the problem to be solved can be perceived to be a simple one. All of the key account managers when talking about frustration explained how unnecessary they thought it was, that more often than not there was a simple solution that was not taken:

“...just frustrated I think was probably the key feeling. It was just frustration in the fact that eh again to my mind there was simple conclusion, um, oh sorry, a simple

solution which was just deliver the stock, yeah?” (Carl, Incident No. 32, 11/10/2007)

“...totally frustrated, we got wrapped up in this big sort of debate around whose fault is it it’s not happening. ((clears throat)) So it’s kind of the sort of, was it the account causing the problem or was it the, the carriers causing us a problem or was it ourselves as a business causing the problem?” (Carl, Incident No. 31, 11/10/2007)

“Not good because I felt, frustrated, out of control, I felt as though my reputation was at stake, eh and I felt exposed and that’s not good a place to be really...” (Carlos, Incident No. 51, 15/10/2007)

When discussing conflict within the organisation for the key account managers involved, there was an overwhelming sense of frustration. Together with this frustration came two other main consequences of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict: firstly an increased tendency to compete or get angry and secondly demotivation, causing the key account managers to reflect on their current role and consider changes. The increased levels of frustration caused the key account managers to act more aggressively and become more competitive and where the perception was one of continued frustration over having to constantly having to handle unnecessary conflicts, the consequence was then de-motivation. The findings associated with increased competitive behaviour are presented next followed by the findings related to the issue of motivation.

Competing

Increased competitive behaviour was mentioned by nine of the interviewed key account managers as a consequence of conflict and was a component being referred to 12 times across the 112 incidents. The increased competitive behaviour is linked to

frustration; where an issue is not resolved key account managers can become angry and begin to force what they believe to be best solutions. Even Rose, the key account manager who had the least to say of all the respondents about conflict in general, found that the challenge of conflict could change her approach:

“And so I have, I have run into conflict with, you know, I’m very quick to temper and one of the things that I’ve had to really train myself, especially with email, is to not respond right away to something that I, I may get, that appears to be challenging... It’s not always been the case. I mean I have been known in the past to, you know respond too quickly to things and you know that come back to bite you.” (Rose, Incident No. 101, 06/03/2008)

This increased competitiveness was seen as a consequence of conflict which can have a negative effect on the outcome:

“...sometimes a level of competitiveness that makes you feel that way, personal competitiveness, can often, or sometimes make you lose sight of the real end goal.” (Gerald, Incident No. 4, 15/02/2007)

Finally, the findings associated with motivation or de-motivation as a consequence of conflict which is experienced by the key account managers involved are presented.

Motivation

Twelve of those interviewed found dealing with too much conflict to be demotivating. Where there is almost constant frustration, the positive consequences found in meeting the challenge give way to a feeling of getting nowhere and wanting to simply give up:

“So I kind of ended up raising my voice and then disengaging, just from the conversation because you’re just like “Prpph”, it’s like talking to a brick wall. Childish

because I was just like “Right! I’ve tried to be rational, I’ve tried to be adult, you’re not listening to me, therefore I’m going to sulk”. Because you know there’s only...I suppose in that, in that instance there’s only so much you can...” (Jane, Incident No. 77, 06/02/2008)

De-motivation as a consequence of experiencing conflict can get to the point for key account managers where they want to change organisations:

“It’s not pleasant..., it de-motivates you, yeah... Well if they’re that fundamentally un-commercial and inept, I don’t want to work here anymore...” (Kevin, Incident No. 39, 11/10/2007)

“I think it’s I find it, if it’s going to get you down you wouldn’t be in the job, you couldn’t hack it, you’d leave, it’s as simple as that. I think, um, you know, we’ve just had a guy join our business who’s a placement student and he hated it and left within six weeks but for me it doesn’t bother me.” (Carlos, Incident No. 49, 15/10/2007)

The perception of almost constant confrontation and challenges within the organisation leads to thoughts of moving on:

“with amalgamation of things wanted to have a new challenge and something like that happened again then that could be the catalyst that would tip me over and say right let’s get the CV out and go and start looking at jobs.” (Peter, Incident No. 35, 11/10/2007)

Although many of the key account managers interviewed found the challenge of dealing with the internal conflicts to be a good thing and a part of their role, too much became a bad thing and led to increased frustration and negative perceptions.

5.3 SUMMARY

For the key account managers involved, their perception of the nature of conflict within the organisation was complex having both departmental and situational sources with positive and negative consequences. There was the perception of a lack of, or poor, communication occurring when the organisational strategy did not fit the sales strategy, when marketing, brand or new product development strategy did not suit the sales strategy, or when the internal departments were not clear on the customer requirements. When considering the key account managers' perceived sources of conflict within the organisation, the perceived sources were divided into two subcategories; departmental and situational sources, the 'where' conflict comes from and 'why' it might occur. The findings show that these perceived sources are complex and interrelated, with any one incident having more than one departmental or situational source.

The perception of this intra-organisation, interpersonal conflict is not entirely negative. In some cases, as a consequence of the conflict experienced, the key account manager felt challenged and stimulated to learn from the experience. However, prolonged exposure to perceived unnecessary conflict leads to increased frustration, competitive behaviour and ultimately de-motivation. These findings form a foundation for the findings in the following chapters, providing an understanding of how the key account manager perceives conflict within the organisation, how it is manifest and what it feels like.

Chapter 6 will now consider the behaviours adopted in managing these incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict and which behaviours under what circumstances may be more effective than others.

CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS

KAM: THE MANAGEMENT OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Following the thematic approach, this chapter explores theme two, the effectiveness of the key account managers' conflict management behaviours and presents the findings associated with the behaviours key account managers adopt when handling instances of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict elicited using the critical incident technique (CIT) element of the interviews. In this research the critical incidents described are actual instances of conflict. Following the definition stated in chapter 3, the incidents described are what the key account managers involved believed to be undesirable situations, misunderstandings, conflicts, disputes or disagreements; i.e., anything which presented a barrier to achieving their goals and extreme enough to be unusual and stand out from their normal routines.

The findings are presented in two sections; the first section deals with the individual incidents as described by the key account managers and following on from the previous chapter presents the critical incidents by the perceived situational and departmental source of conflict. The section continues in presenting further details of individual behaviours showing the complexity of conflict within the organisation from the key account managers' perspective. The purpose of the CIT is to explore the behaviours adopted; specifically what constitutes effective and ineffective behaviour when dealing with conflict in the organisation. Following Thomas's (1976) behavioural style model, the results are presented for each incident by behaviour; collaborating, competing, compromising, accommodating and avoiding.. The section also goes on to present the findings associated with mediation tactics and the complexity of behavioural choice. Figure 6.1 provides a diagrammatic representation of the research findings.

6.2 FINDINGS - KAM: THE MANAGEMENT OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

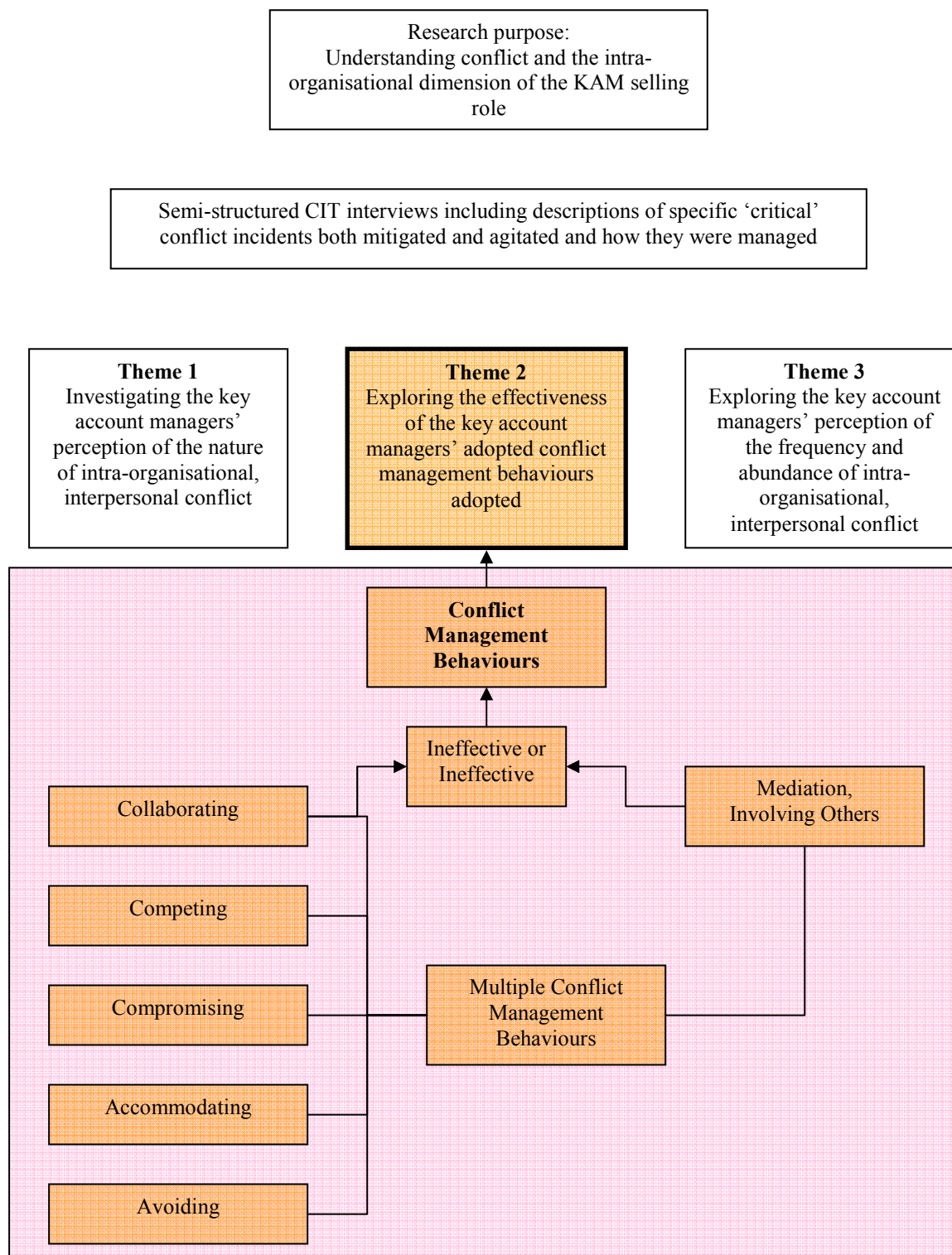


Fig 6.1 Diagrammatic Representation of the Research Findings: Managing Intra-organisational Conflict

The transcripts were once again analysed, this time investigating the behaviours associated with the management of incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. In addition each of the 112 incidents described were separated out and analysed separately and the details summarised; these are presented in appendix G. The behaviours were then summarised by the primary perceived source of the conflict experienced in line with the findings from chapter 5. In many cases multiple situational and department sources were identified in the incident described, the sources identified by the key account manager were the ones used in the analysis. In this phase of the research it is the effectiveness of the behaviour adopted that is under investigation. The behaviours used were sub-categorised into those established by Thomas (1976) in his dual concern theory model; i.e., Collaborating, Competing, Accommodating, Compromising and Avoiding. The aim of this part of the research was to investigate the effectiveness of the behaviours adopted and whether or not the key account manager is able to adapt and change behaviour while managing a specific incident of conflict. Through the coding process, 21 open codes were established relating to the behavioural sub-categories. In addition the two higher categories of mediation and behavioural adaptation were established. These are summarised in table 6.1 and represented in figure 6.1.

| Theme 2 | Higher Categories | Sub-categories | Open Codes |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Exploring the effectiveness of the key account managers' conflict management behaviours adopted</i> | <i>Conflict Management Behaviours</i> | <i>Collaborating Competing Accommodating Compromising Avoiding</i> | <i>Empathy, Understanding, Forced, Constructive, Persuasion, Discussion, Openness, Transparency, Aggression, Challenging, Argued, Ignored, Impatience, Engaging, Retrench, Pressure, Passion, Enthusiasm, Rational, Logical, Leverage</i> |
| | <i>Mediation</i> | <i>Influence, Management, Line Manager, Customer</i> | |
| | <i>Multiple Behaviours</i> | <i>Adapting, Changing,</i> | |

Table 6.1 Coding Summary for Conflict Management Behaviours

6.2.1 The Critical Incidents

Using the CIT, the key account managers involved were asked to describe the behaviours adopted in the management of up to four specific incidents, two of which they perceived to have had a positive outcome and two of which they perceived to have had a negative outcome. Of the 112 incidents described, 69 were perceived to have had a positive outcome or had been handled effectively, while 43 were described as having a negative outcome or had been handled ineffectively. When asked to describe specific events or critical incidents, the key account managers involved had no issue with describing what they felt were the positive situations. When asked to describe a situation which did not go as expected or had a negative outcome all of those who participated had difficulty in recalling such an incident. The tendency was to focus on the positive. Within the organisation the key account manager has to maintain a high degree of positive interdependence; i.e., where both parties perceive the best outcome. In doing so, key account managers maintain effective internal relationships and are able to achieve their objectives without making other parties within the organisation feel as though they have lost out. With a tendency to pursue the best possible outcome all of the time, the memorable incidents will be those with a positive outcome making the negative incidents less frequent and harder to recall:

“Okay I’ll probably need more than a minute to think of that. That is very difficult...” (Stuart, company A, 25/01/20)

“Specifically I’m, you know I’m, I’m struggling to think of one, I’m, you know, I’m guessing I mean I can’t think of that, of that many.” (Neil, company B, 30/01/2007)”

“...it’s always the difficult one because people don’t like to focus on, their negatives as much, do you mind if I just pause a second just until I think about this one?” (Cliff, company F, 22/01/2008)

“Yeah it’s difficult to be honest to try to give examples.” (Carl, company C, 11/10/2007)

After asking about the difficulty in recalling such an incident Anna's response was,

“Ooh that's because sales people always think they're right.” (Anna, company E, 01/01/2008)

After a moment's pause for thought reflection 26 of the key account managers were able to recollect a negative incident. Three of those interviewed were unable to recall a negative incident describing only positive experiences. One quote from Gerald helps to contextualise the incidents being described and demonstrates the focus within the organisation.

“...there's managing the customer and there's managing the internal politics and expectations...” (Gerald, company A, 15/02/2007)

The key account manager has to manage internal relationships and conflict management is one part of that role. In the next section the findings relating the behaviours to the perceived sources of conflict are presented.

6.2.2 The Complexity of Intra-organisational, Interpersonal Conflict: A KAM Perspective

In order to make the findings clear, the behaviours adopted are presented in two ways: firstly the behaviours in relation to the situation sources of conflict, followed by the behaviours by the perceived departmental sources of conflict. In each case both the positive and negative outcomes are presented.

Critical incidents by perceived situational source of conflict

In order to investigate the effectiveness of the behaviour(s) adopted, each of the critical incidents described had to be analysed and the details collated. These findings are presented in table 6.2. In this table, the five behaviours were identified 246 times across the 112 incidents described when analysed in association with the seven sources of situational conflict developed in chapter 5. Table 6.2 summarises these findings with the effectively managed positive outcomes displayed on the top row (1's) for each source (in black) and the negatives on the lower row (0's) in red.

| Behaviour | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|---|-----------|--------------|---------------|----------|
| Situational Sources of Conflict | Outcome | Collaborating | Competing | Compromising | Accommodating | Avoiding |
| Communication | +ve | 1111111111111111 1111111111111111 111 | 1111111 | | | 1 |
| | -ve | 0000000000 | 00000000 | | 00 | 0000 |
| Resources | +ve | 1111111111111111 1111111111111111 111 | 11111111 | | | |
| | -ve | 000000000000 | 0000 | | 00 | 0 |
| Goals | +ve | 1111111111111111 | 111 | 1 | 1 | |
| | -ve | 0 | 00 | | 00 | 00 |
| People | +ve | 1111111111111111 11111 | 11111111 | | 1 | 1 |
| | -ve | 000 | 000000 | | 00000 | 0000 |
| Roles | +ve | 1111111111111111 111 | 1111 | 1 | 111 | 1 |
| | -ve | 00000 | 0000 | 00 | 0000 | 000 |
| Culture | +ve | 1111 | 11 | | | |
| | -ve | 0 | | 00 | | |
| Self interest | +ve | 11 | 1 | | 1 | |
| | -ve | 00 | 00 | | 0 | 0 |

Table 6.2 Summary of the Critical Incidents by Perceived Situational Source of Conflict

The reason there is a larger number of references is because the key account managers frequently referred to more than one of the behaviours (collaborating, competing, compromising, accommodating and avoiding) as being adopted during any one incident and also frequently described the incident as having more than one situational source. In this table the high concentration of collaborative behaviours can be seen with the greater concentration in the incidents with a perceived source of conflict in communication and resources. The higher propensity for a negative outcome is also clear when the compromising, accommodating and avoiding behaviours are adopted. These will be covered in more detail later in this chapter.

Critical incidents by perceived department source

The analytical process was then repeated, this time presenting the behaviours in association with the perceived departmental source of conflict. Here, 152 behaviours were described, again multiple behaviours for each incident but with fewer of the

incidents described being perceived as coming from more than one department. The findings are summarised in table 6.3.

| Departmental Sources of Conflict | Behaviour | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|--------------|---------------|----------|
| | Outcome | Collaborating | Competing | Compromising | Accommodating | Avoiding |
| Marketing | +ve | 11111111111111111111 | 111111 | | | |
| | -ve | 0000 | 000 | | 0 | |
| Senior Management | +ve | 1111111111111111 | | | 11 | |
| | -ve | 00000000 | 000 | 00 | 00 | 000 |
| Key account managers | +ve | 1111 | 1 | | 11 | 1 |
| | -ve | 000 | 000000 | | 000 | 000 |
| Finance | +ve | 11111111 | 111 | | | |
| | -ve | 0000000 | 000 | | | 00 |
| Production and Planning | +ve | 1111111111 | 1111 | 1 | | |
| | -ve | 00 | 00 | | 00 | 00 |
| NPD Technical | +ve | 11111111 | 11 | | | |
| | -ve | 0 | | | | |
| Supply Chain | +ve | 11 | 1 | | | |
| | -ve | 0 | | | | |
| Customer services | +ve | 1 | | | | |
| | -ve | 0 | | | | |
| HR | +ve | 1 | | | | |
| | -ve | 0 | | | | |

Table 6.3 Summary of the Critical Incidents by Perceived Departmental Source of Conflict

Collaboration was referred to the most throughout the interviews across all of the departmental sources. Again, when analysed by departmental source, the largely negative outcomes associated with the choice of accommodating and avoiding behaviours is shown. Now the findings presenting the effectiveness of each of the behaviours will be described in turn.

6.2.3 Conflict Management Behaviours

Tables 6.2 and 6.3 show how complex the behaviours are when linked to the perceived sources of conflict. Each key account manager interviewed described multiple sources and multiple behaviours across the 112 incidents. Looking purely at

the behaviours, table 6.4 shows the behavioural styles adopted and the number of key account managers referencing a particular behavioural style, and the outcomes.

| Category | Sub-categories | No. of Respondents Referencing | No. of +ve Incidents Referencing | No. of -ve Incidents Referencing | TOTAL |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| Conflict Management Behaviours | <i>Collaborating</i> | 29 | 62 | 23 | 85 |
| | <i>Competing</i> | 21 | 18 | 17 | 35 |
| | <i>Compromising</i> | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | <i>Accommodating</i> | 15 | 5 | 10 | 15 |
| | <i>Avoiding</i> | 11 | 1 | 11 | 12 |
| | TOTALS | <i>N/A</i> | | 88 | 64 |

Table 6.4 Summary of Described Conflict Management Behaviours by Incident

Table 6.4 shows that all of those interviewed referred to collaborative, problem solving behaviours at least once with competing / forcing behaviours mentioned by 21 of those interviewed. Collaboration was also described in the highest number of incidents, 85, with 23 of these having a negative outcome. Competing behaviours show a balance in outcome (18 positive and 17 negative) while compromising and avoiding behaviours showed a more negative outcome. Cooperation or compromise was the one behaviour which was hardly referred to, only three times by three key account managers. Having presented the findings which describe the incidents of conflict as described by the key account managers involved, the next step is to explore how these conflicts of are managed.

Collaborating

All 29 of the key account managers interviewed referred to collaborative behaviour, with collaboration being mentioned in 85 of the 112 incidents. Collaboration is clearly the behaviour of choice and, in many cases where described, the first behaviour adopted. The key account manager's choice is for a persuasive rather than aggressive behavioural style:

“Because of experience really, because I felt that if you come in with a style that is um very aggressive and very

assertive and bear in mind you're dealing with, with colleagues not on the same level, every one of those colleagues were at a higher level, I then needed to um persuade and use, and use persuasive styles to, to enhance my position and, and to gain, to gain their confidence and agreement...I met with questioning um but I tackled each one in a way that, that then could reach a solution so it was extremely effective and the result was excellent..." (Stuart, Incident No. 2, 25/01/2007)

Collaborative behaviours are distinguished by the key account manager making clear arguments and providing solutions in order to reach the best result:

"I would phone people and explain what the situation was and then follow it up.... I think, presenting a, a clear well thought out precise argument usually helps to secure the results." (Dirk, Incident No. 12, 30/01/2007)

"In order to resolve that, there's no point in just saying, "That's just stupid, that's just wrong," you have to come up with a solution as to how you are going to solve the problem. So, the next step was to go away and think about it rationally and then put together an alternative solution that was sellable to the chairman of the business." (Paul, Incident No. 18, 05/02/2007)

Collaborative behaviour helps in promoting rational discussions:

"...knowing the behaviour of the person I was dealing with, going in shouting the odds is not going get you anywhere. If you go in and have a... a rational discussion and go through it and then put it into writing, err, achieves the aims and it did." (Paul, Incident No. 19, 05/02/2007)

Collaborative behaviour was also referred to frequently in conjunction with teamwork:

“I guess its teamwork has got a massive part to play in it really, um, and we try and get as many people involved as we can because from my perspective the more people understand the issues, the more that we communicate the pressures and the different scenarios that we’re under then the less conflicts you get really.” (Carlos Incident No’. 49, 15/10/2008)

“I’m not necessarily getting them to change what they’re trying to achieve but maybe I’m trying to get them to change how they’re trying to achieve it by asking them maybe to think about the impact of what they’re saying on others and the way they’re approaching things.” (Kevin, Incident No. 38, 11/10/2007)

Throughout the interviews, the key account managers referred to empathy and understanding, to presenting clear arguments and getting the other individuals to fully understand the situation. However, when things did not develop and issues did not get resolved, the frustration mentioned in chapter 5 forces the key account manager to change behaviour. Collaboration is not all about getting the best result. Of the 85 incidents described as being managed collaboratively, 23 did not have the desired outcome, showing that collaboration is not always the best approach.

Competing

Although collaboration was discussed by all of the participants, competitive behaviour was also referred to by many. Twenty-one of the key account managers interviewed described having to use competitive behaviour as a consequence of not achieving the desired result through collaboration, and having to change their behavioural style:

“Sometimes impatience of not getting things through as speedily as, as I would have liked... sometimes you just need to ride a little bit rough-shod over people or whatever.” (Neil, Incident No. 8, 30/01/2007).

In situations where there is some urgency and no time to go through a full collaborative approach, the emphasis may shift to being more forceful to get the desired result more quickly:

“Probably more kind of tougher than in the other situation because it wasn’t about a, let’s find a way of doing this together, it was about we, we need to just do this and kind of putting my foot down and saying sorry guys I know this is a pain for you but we, we do need to do it and we just need to get on with it and there is no um-ing and ah-ing or ways round it, we just need to do it.” (Wendy, Incident No. 45, 15/10/2007)

Moreover, depending upon the individuals involved, the competitive approach could result in the best outcome as it did in 18 of the incidents:

“...actually he really respected that, interestingly enough, because he wants a fight and I gave him a fight whereas normally I’m quite mild mannered. And so that was interesting. That was where I thought I’d, I hadn’t handled conflict very well but actually ((laughingly)) I probably handled it very well.” (James, Incident No. 63, 01/02/2008)

Being forceful could have benefits:

“I was pleased how the situation ended because hopefully it, it taught really people, the people who were marketing that at the end of the day the customer is the most important thing.” (Jonathan, Incident No. 15, 02/02/2007)

“...because I gave them clear, a clear decision, a clear, I gave them a clear example, a clear decision, let them know that it was, it was up to them, you know.” (Carlos, Incident No. 50, 15/10/2007)

In 35 of the incidents, key account managers described a competitive forcing behaviour as being used to try and resolve the conflict situation. The outcomes were split evenly, 18 having a perceived positive outcome and 17 having a negative outcome. For the key account manager the more aggressive style is perceived to create issues rather than resolve them and has the perception of not working:

“...using aggressive style, as well you know doesn't work...” (Stuart, Incident No. 2, 25/01/2007)

With a more competitive behavioural choice where the negative consequences may be more severe, the implications and long term effects needed to be considered:

“Don't confront me about it. I've been perfectly civil but quite firm and say, “That's what's happening, end of story,” type of tone. So almost using the same words to convey different messages really...” (Gerald, Incident No. 5, 15/02/2007)

“I was putting pressure on probably, putting pressure on by, by trying to push my requirements to the top of the agenda, by becoming more pushy about what I required, probably getting more aggressive.” (Dirk, Incident No. 11, 30/01/2007)

“I've been very direct or very to the point, which at the time has seemed the correct way to react yet when I've then sat back and thought about it an hour later I thought well I wonder how they've interpreted that...” (Peter, Incident No. 34, 11/10/2007)

Collaboration and competing were the most referred to behavioural styles adopted and from tables 6.2 and 6.3 these behaviours are spread across all of the situational and departmental sources of conflict. Only when dealing with a perceived departmental source of conflict from other key account managers or a communication situational source did the choice of competitive behaviour have more negative than positive outcomes. This shows that the source of conflict is an important factor in choice of behavioural strategy. Forcing the message did not always get it across, and competing with team members may well have negative consequences.

Accommodating

Fifteen of those interviewed described having adopted an accommodating behavioural style while dealing with conflict in 15 incidents. The accommodating behaviour occurred most frequently where the perceived situational source of conflict was people, goals or roles relating to senior management, other key account managers or finance; i.e., where the perceived source of conflict is more people oriented. Where key account managers are unable to achieve their desired result they go along with the other individuals accepting the situation:

“You’ve just got to put up with it. You’re led to believe that, discussions are taking place; in fact, we’re led to believe that action has been taken. At some point you’ve got to say to yourself the more I go on about it the less likely it is someone’s going to pay any attention to it if you see what I mean?” (David, Incident No. 24, 13/02/2007)

In other situations, when dealing with issues with senior management, the key account manager is told how things are, and has to go along with what is said:

“The best way of describing it is like, you know, we behaved like a bunch of two year old kids that has just been, been told to sit on the naughty step. You do what you’ve got to do but you don’t do anything else. So our

behaviour, it wasn't collaborative. Um it wasn't proactive, it was, and I guess the word's apathetic." (William, Incident No. 59, 01/20/2008)

Of the 15 incidents using an accommodating behavioural strategy, ten had negative outcomes; i.e., from the key account managers' perspective, not the desired result. For the key account managers involved, accommodating was the best behavioural choice for the incident described where the perception was that there would be no point doing otherwise, that the perceived best outcome would result by allowing the other party to lead. In many ways this is an avoidance tactic where the key account manager does not want to handle the incident of conflict; this is reflected where avoidance is mentioned.

Avoiding

This research shows that avoiding stands out as having an almost wholly negative outcome from the key account manager's perspective. Eleven of the key account managers referred to avoidance 12 times across the incidents, 11 of which had negative outcomes. From tables 6.1 and 6.2 these relate to situations where the perceived situational source is communication, goals, people and roles, while the department source is perceived to be senior management, other key account managers, finance and planning. Sometimes the key account manager simply does not want to deal with the conflict:

"I was almost passive and, you know, backing off a little bit thinking I don't really want to have these conversations and you know just trying to hide I guess." (Wendy, Incident No. 47, 15/10/2007)

"I guess I just put it, pushed it back off me but I didn't push it back off me for a shirking reason..." (Carlos, Incident No. 51, 15/10/2007)

The final behaviour to be considered is that of compromise, the least referred to of the five behaviours under investigation.

Compromise

Of the five behaviours under investigation, compromise was the least discussed or referred to; only three of those interviewed described compromising behaviours in three incidents, two of which had a negative outcome. It could be that in describing a collaborative behaviour they incorporate compromising or cooperative behaviours recognising these behaviours in the context of working together as opposed to against each other:

“So over time, to be quite honest with you, eventually it got to the point where I blew up at this person and, and told them, eh, very directly that I was tired of the way that it was being managed and that, you know, you need to start cooperating with me because we’re basically working towards the same cause instead of trying to work against me and not recognising all the work that I’m already doing to help you resolve the situation.” (Ruben, Incident No. 104, 06/03/2008)

However the key account managers interviewed had no reservations about the remaining behaviour, explaining that sometimes it is better to avoid the conflict than to get involved.

This covers the five management behaviours but leaves one tactic in dealing with conflict not covered by the behaviours, that of mediation – involving someone else in order to achieve the desired result.

Mediation

One tactic of avoidance, described by two of the participants is that of mediation. One of the incidents referring to mediation, or involving another to resolve the issue, had a positive outcome, the other a negative.

- 1.) Dirk – Mediation, Communication and Resources, negative outcome
- 2.) Jonathan – Mediation, People and Communication, positive outcome

In both of these situations the key account managers got their line manager involved in the dispute in order to achieve the desired result. Rather than collaboration they describe involving the line manager to mediate and decide the outcome.

All of these behaviours presented were not described in isolation. In fact, the total number of behaviours described across the 112 incidents was 248. Thus, in any one incident, a number of different (adaptive) behaviours were adopted. The finding of multiple adaptive behaviours in response to conflict will be explored in the following section.

6.2.4 Multiple, Adaptive Behaviours: Collaboration and Competing

Table 6.5 summarises the findings where the key account managers described multiple behaviours in handling a single conflict situation. All of those interviewed described at least one incident as being managed using more than one behavioural style. This suggests that the use of adaptive behaviours was widespread amongst the key account managers interviewed. Thirty-three of the 112 incidents were managed using multiple behaviours, with the key account manager adapting to the changing situation and changing behavioural style in order to obtain the best possible outcome. The highlighted areas of the table show where the key account manager changed behaviour with a negative outcome. The table shows 19 incidents referencing multiple behaviours resulting in a negative outcome, this being influenced again by the choice of avoidance, with 11 of the incidents having avoiding as one of the behaviours. In

total, nine combinations of behaviours were described, the most common being a combination of competing and collaborating:

“I suppose gentle at first if you like and then, and then get more pushy as and when I need to, need to be and that would be...” (Dirk, Incident No. 12, 30/01/2007)

| Combination of Behaviours used | No. of Respondents Referencing | No. of +ve Incidents Referencing | No. of –ve Incidents Referencing |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Collaboration and Avoidance</i> | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| <i>Collaboration and Competing</i> | 12 | 8 | 7 |
| <i>Mediation and Competing</i> | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Competing and Avoidance</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| <i>Competing and Accommodation</i> | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Collaboration and Accommodation</i> | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| <i>Collaboration and Compromise</i> | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Avoidance and Accommodation</i> | 6 | 1 | 6 |
| <i>Competing and Avoiding</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| TOTALS | 29 | 14 | 19 |
| <i>Total number of respondents referring to multiple behaviours in the management of specific incidents 22 (Some described more than one set of multiple behaviours)</i> | | | |

Table 6.5 Summary of Described Multiple Conflict Management Behaviours

Table 6.5 illustrates the combinations of behaviours described by the 29 participants and shows that the key account manager is able to respond to a situation and adopt a new behavioural style in order to try and achieve the best possible outcome.

6.3 SUMMARY

The behaviours under investigation reflected those from Thomas' (1976) dual concern theory model. Using the CIT, the aim was to determine which behaviours or combination of behaviours would be most effective for the key account manager in managing instances of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict; i.e., which behaviours from the key account managers' perspective have the desired outcome?

From chapter 5, the perceived source of conflict is in itself complex; attempting to link the perceived source with a behavioural style and outcome shows an overwhelming tendency for the key account manager to use collaborative behaviours whatever the situation. Collaboration is very much the first step leading to other behavioural choices. Where collaboration alone does not achieve the desired result, the key account managers adopt a more forceful and assertive position, in order to take control of the situation. In many incidents the use of a combination of collaborative and competitive behaviours achieved the desired result. When working with departments to achieve a customer objective, the choice is collaboration and the outcome mostly positive.

The behavioural style tends to shift when dealing with conflicts with other key account managers or senior management regarding role goal or people issues. Under these circumstances the key account manager chooses to avoid the situation with an undesired outcome in almost all cases.

In summary the key account managers used a number of different approaches in the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict; the process is complex and each incident so unique that, although there is some learning, this may not apply to the next situation. The findings show that collaboration works best most of the time and is the preferred behavioural choice in every incident described.

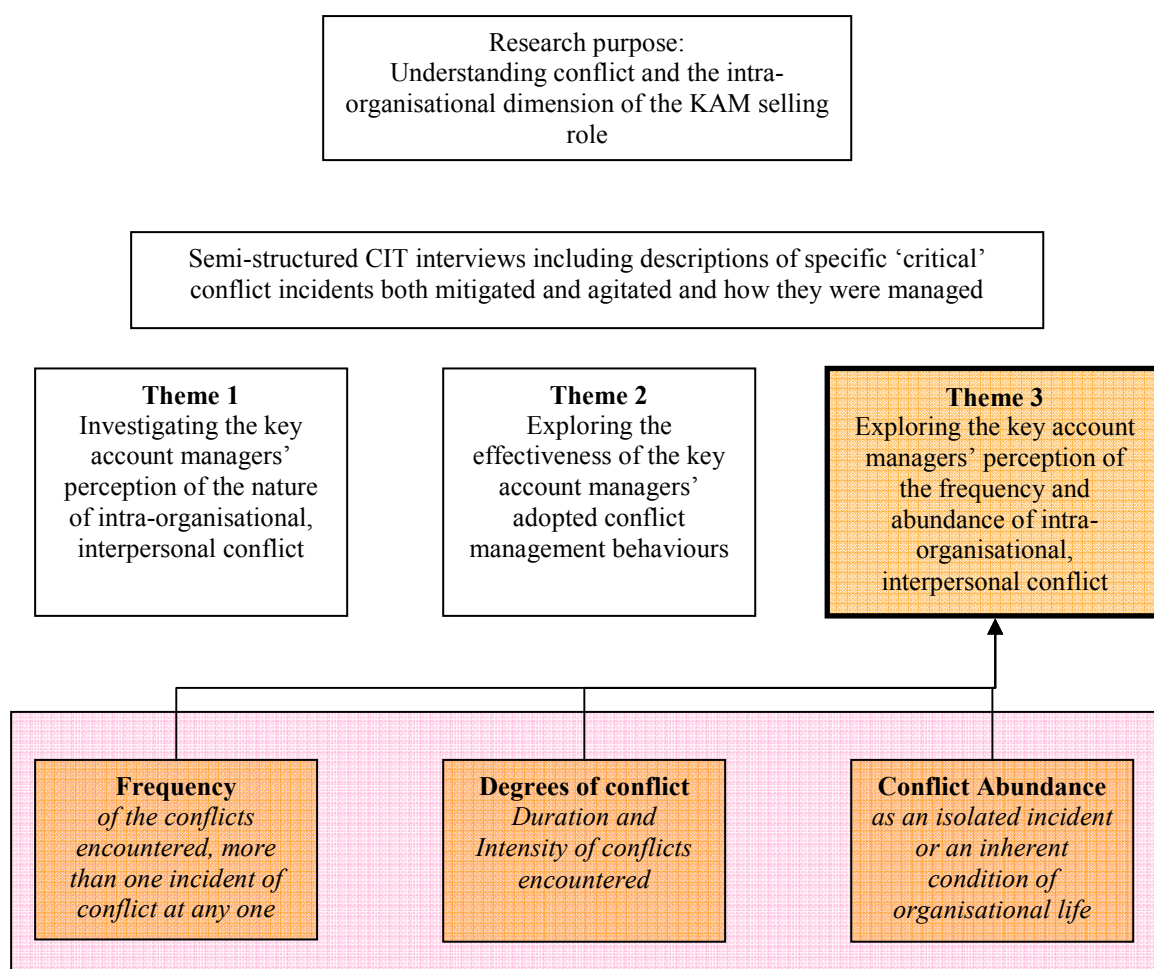
CHAPTER 7 FINDINGS

THE FREQUENCY AND ABUNDANCE OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT: A KAM PERSPECTIVE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The final theme under investigation in this research is the abundance of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict within the organisation as perceived by the key account managers involved; i.e., the quantity of conflict episodes experienced and over what period of time. Chapter 2 provided an overview of this level of conflict and how the literature tends to consider conflict within the organisation occurring as discrete isolated incidents. One of the aims of this research was explore Pondy's (1989) alternative conflict paradigm through investigating the abundance of conflict within the organisation from a key account management perspective by answering the question of whether conflict is indeed an inherent condition of social interaction within the organisation or in fact a series of discrete isolated incidents in an otherwise cooperative state. Continuing to follow the thematic approach, Figure 7.1 summarises the position of the findings in relation to the abundance of conflict.

7.2 THE FREQUENCY AND ABUNDANCE OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT: A KAM PERSPECTIVE



*Fig 7.1 Diagrammatic Representation of the Research Findings:
The Abundance of Conflict*

Based on the coding of the interview transcripts with regard to the frequency and abundance of conflict, the three clear higher categories which are highlighted in figure 7.1 emerged: the frequency of conflicts encountered by the key account manager within the organisation; the duration and intensity of the conflicts experienced; and a key account manager’s perception of conflict as either an inherent condition of the intra-organisational selling role or an occasionally occurring phenomenon. In this chapter the findings are presented in three sections reflecting the emergent categories: the experience of multiple conflicts at the same time, the perception of the intensity of the conflict experienced and finally a view of conflict as either a number of isolated

incidents or as an inherent condition of organisational life. The coding summary is given in table 7.1 and a detailed summary of all the responses to the questions related to the frequency and abundance of conflict is presented in appendix I, together with a memo written during the coding process showing how the sub-categories were clustered in appendix H-1, and the NVivo 8.0 coding tree diagram in appendix H-2.

| Theme 3 | Higher Categories | Sub-categories | Open Codes |
|--|---|--|--|
| <i>Exploring the key account managers' perception of the frequency and abundance of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict</i> | <i>Frequency of conflict</i> | <i>Multiple Same time One time</i> | <i>Time, lots, many, few, loads, any number any one time, at once, together one, single</i> |
| | <i>Duration and intensity of conflict</i> | <i>Importance, Ongoing Short term,</i> | <i>Length, Intensity, Confrontation, little things, major things ongoing, , significance short term, quick, today only</i> |
| | <i>Conflict as an inherent condition of organisational life</i> | <i>Constant</i> | <i>Constantly, always, regular occurrence</i> |

Table 7.1 Coding Summary for the Abundance of Conflict

7.2.1 Frequency of Conflicts Encountered

Key account managers are in a unique position, as representatives of their organisation within their customer base and representatives of their customers within the organisation. In this role, key account managers can be exposed to a number of different issues across a wide range of relationships on a daily basis, but how frequently do these issues become what they perceive to be conflicts?

Twenty-seven of the 29 key account managers interviewed had no difficulty with the question and gave quick, clear responses. The two remaining recipients were unable to answer the question, in that no specific answer was given or the question was not directly answered. The responses ranged from two or three to a dozen (the interview protocols and questions are presented in appendix A-1). All of the participants

recognised conflict as something they have to deal with frequently (from this point on the quotations are linked to the organisation and the individual not a specific incident):

“...the average is probably two or three going on at any one point in time.” (Kenny, company F, 07/02/2008)

“You know, it’s really hard to say because it’s, it’s something that’s ongoing. If I just use the example of this morning I’ve already handled two conflicts...” (Ruben, company G, 06/03/08)

“I guess you can handle ten little things all that will be going on all at the same time. In terms of fairly significant major things probably the worst it’s got it probably three or four things all going spinning what can appear to be out of control at any one time.” (Gerald, company A, 15/02/2007)

“Oh I’ve got four or five at one time.” (Neil, company B, 30/01/2007)

“...at any one time there are maybe half a dozen conflict things running...” (Stephen, company B, 20/02/2008)

“I’ve lost count, probably, loads probably, in terms of conflicts I’ve probably had six or seven in one go ...” (Stuart, company A, 25/01/2007)

“...like a piece of string so, could be, could be any. Could be, you know, could be ten in a day.” (Robert, company F, 27/02/2008)

“Oh at least a dozen. It’s difficult to, to say exactly but at least a dozen, depending on what’s happening at the time.”
(William, company E, 01/02/2008)

The full range of responses from the 29 participants is presented in appendix I. These key account managers did frequently encounter conflict within their organisations; moreover, these conflicts did not always occur in isolation. Conflict, to these key account managers, is a frequent feature of their organisational lives. Having put a number to the amount of conflicts they may be handling at any one time the participants went on to describe what they meant, further emphasising the frequency of conflicts encountered. For the key account managers involved, a project which they have to manage can be perceived as one large conflict or a series of smaller conflicts centred on the project they are managing: the key account managers described how any one situation can in fact be comprised of a number of separate incidents.

“... it’s difficult to describe really because there’s conflicts that go on within a conflict, especially when I was project managing this because, you know, you tend to get an issue that crops up with an individual that you know then has implications on other people and then that can start conflicts between them and also with them and yourself, them and the person that’s, so it kind of gets into a little triangle almost.” *(Peter, company C, 11/10/2007)*

When discussing their perception of the abundance of conflict, the key account managers also considered a time element of the situation bringing a temporal perspective to the conflicts encountered:

“Over a period of time that could be ongoing... and managed at different levels, yeah, probably yeah and you could have a product issue, you’ve got a technical issue, you’ve got to have eh planning issue, you could have a buying issue, you could have a merchandising issue,

conflict with the merchandiser, conflict with the trading assistant, conflict within the supplier...” (Frank, company D, 15/10/2007)

Having already discussed what they perceive to be the characteristics of conflict and how they managed specific incidents in the closing stages of the interview, the key account managers were able to discuss conflict with more confidence and, in addition to the complexity of the incidents encountered and the temporal perspective, also added a sequential perspective describing the conflicts encountered as a series of related incidents:

“The conflict side of it came when um the promotions were constantly rejected and time was lost and the account was, was getting constantly concerned because deadlines were not being met um and so there was a constant, virtual circle of issues.” (Stuart, company A, 25/01/2007)

Only one of the participants, James, did not answer the questions in that the answers given were not directly related to the question asked, although the participant was able to describe five specific incidents of conflict. One other participant, Kevin, found describing specific incidents difficult and this was reflected in his response:

“I think because I’m finding it difficult to give you examples of conflicts in the first instance, to be able to answer that question is almost impossible to be honest.” (Kevin, company C, 11/10/2007)

Kevin and James did not work for the same organisation.

When considering conflict within the organisation, each key account manager indicated that it was present and, after giving an example of the number of conflicts they might handle at any one time, with some thought went on to describe what they thought to be different degrees of conflict. That is to say, the question prompted the

respondents to consider the intensity and duration of the conflict being described and whether, reflecting on the whole interview process they would still actually describe it as conflict or something else.

7.2.2 Degrees of Conflict - Duration and Intensity

Having looked at the frequency of the conflicts encountered as perceived by the key account managers involved, here the duration and intensity of conflict are explored. From the interviews conducted, the category of duration and intensity of conflict stood out and had a close relationship to the perceived frequency of conflicts encountered, where the results show the key account manager having both a temporal and sequential perspective on the conflicts encountered. Having responded to the question of having to deal with more than one conflict at any one time, the interviewees then paused for thought. Subsequently 20 of the 29 key account managers interviewed moved on to discuss further their views on what they were actually describing as conflicts of how intense a situation has to be in order to be defined as an incident of conflict.

Intensity

One aspect of the conflicts experienced taken into consideration is the intensity of the conflicts encountered. Although key account managers were able to clearly state that they dealt frequently with multiple incidents of conflict, they also felt that some incidents were perhaps too trivial to be called conflicts. The responses indicate the conflicts encountered have different degrees of intensity:

“I class as a big conflict... one I’ve described or explained or the supply chain one I’ve explained, obviously those, in their moment, are really big conflicts, big business impact. There would have been other stuff going on beneath that, much smaller issues, smaller conflicts but I wouldn’t have necessarily seen them as conflict, does that make sense? In my role there will be multiple levels of conflict going on, I

would suggest at various times.” (Carl, Company C, 11/10/2007)

This response again shows a perceived incident of conflict from the key account management perspective to be complex and composed of multiple components, the big, important issues being made up of smaller, less important issues. Linking this to the frequency of conflicts encountered, the big issues are more scarce while the minor issues make up the multiple conflicts presented at the start of the chapter:

“The bigger scale ones, you know, I don’t think I’ve ever had more than kind of one at a time to be honest but in terms of the day to day, you know, there’s issues within the team or it’s an issue within the site that you need to deal with, you can have five or six a day of those going on at one time, you know, if it’s a particularly ((laughingly)) bad day.” (Wendy, Company D, 15/10/2007)

The minor issues can be dealt with quickly with less concern while the big issues present the real barriers to achieving the sales objectives:

“...sometimes you have to put conflict into context don’t you. True conflict is something that you, you can spot. Misunderstandings or minor disagreements they’re not true conflicts... Various degrees of conflict happen every day, and you just deal with it and move on. Conflict about a secretary ringing up and saying you haven’t put your work plan for this week, that’s not conflict that’s a misunderstanding that you can deal with very quickly.” (Stephen, Company B, 20/02/2007)

“...well I think if, if it’s affecting a customer then I’d say that’d be something that would be quite high level ... if it’s something that you know is ((pause for thought)),

something that you know in the grand scheme of things isn't really going to make the customer, it isn't really going to make the business you know that much more money then, then I think that'd, that'd be something that's quite low-level..." (Jonathan, Company B, 02/02/2007)

In addition to the intensity of the conflict encountered, whether it is perceived to be of major or minor importance, there is also the length of time over which the conflict is experienced which was also discussed by the key account managers involved

Duration

In addition to the explanation of the different intensity of conflicts experienced, the key account managers also went on to describe the duration of the different conflicts encountered. If an incident can not be resolved satisfactorily then the incident will linger and have to be managed in conjunction with any other subsequent incident arising:

"Potentially you're handling two or three conflicts at a time because not, they're not always a short-term fix, some of them are longer-term that, that can't be sorted out straight away. I think it's an evolving piece. Sometimes you've got conflict that cannot be sorted out straight away." (Larry, Company E, 06/02/2008)

The minor issues are prioritised and handled quickly and do not last as long as the major issues which may require more attention:

"...because I prioritise them and what I do is pick up ones that I know I can fix in an instant, so get those out the way and then once it needs a little bit of work I start, start

working on them and then review it and come back to it.”

(Anna, company E, 1/02/2008)

Although the findings concerned with the perceived nature and characteristics of intra-organisation interpersonal conflict were presented in chapter 5, another feature of conflict within the organisation became apparent, that of degree – comprising intensity and duration. Here the key account managers described the variations in the importance of the conflicts encountered and how long the conflicts lasted. The minor incidents were dealt with quickly while the major incidents could last longer. The findings show that the key account manager frequently has to handle more than one conflict at any one time, since the longer lasting incidents take time to resolve while minor issues are continually encountered and need to be dealt with at the same time. All of the key account managers interviewed were able to describe different conflict situations with very different characteristics. The next step was to explore Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint, conflict within the organisation, as a series of isolated incidents or something which is always present.

7.2.3 Conflict: Isolated Incidents or Inherent Condition?

Throughout the interview process, the key account managers involved were able to identify and describe many incidents of conflict. In the first two sections of chapter 7 the findings have shown that incidents of conflict do not necessarily occur in isolation. Indeed for 27 of the 29 participants, multiple incidents of conflict do occur at any one time. These conflict incidents vary in their intensity and duration, with the key account managers able to distinguish between what they would call 'full blown' major incidents of conflict and minor disagreements. Twenty-four of the 29 respondents described conflict as something they are continually dealing with within their own organisations:

“Internal conflict is something that I would say that I'm pretty constantly trying to deal with.” (Gerald, company A, 15/02/2007)

“I would say constantly dealing with.” (Dirk, company B, 30/01/2007)

“... within the organisation I, I think that, I think it’s ongoing.” (Jonathan, company B, 02/02/2007)

“I suppose you just get immune to it as confrontation. You just think of it as an ongoing part of your job. But if when you actually break it down to that then, yes, then it would be an ongoing conflict or negotiation.” (Paul, company B, 05/02/2007)

“I’d say constantly dealing with to be honest, I think, you know, in any sales role you are because sometimes that’s your job, it’s almost your job to manage everybody in, in the whole picture and that can be quite difficult sometimes.” (Wendy, company D, 15/10/2007)

“No it’s constant but it’s constant in terms of there’s always something changing. It’s, it’s the nature of something changes and that change and therefore by convention it’s a conflict to what the plan was. It’s constant, but it’s also what makes the job interesting.” (Kenny, company F, 07/02/2008)

A full synopsis of the responses is given in appendix I. Only five of the key account managers interviewed saw conflict as isolated incidents within the organisation. Of the five responses, two relate back to the duration and intensity of conflict; i.e., they saw the bigger incidents as isolated occurrences but saw smaller minor conflicts as a regular occurrence.

“I would say true conflict comes across from time to time. I think stuff you deal with on an ongoing basis are

disagreements or minor confrontations. True conflict, in my view, is something that um happens infrequently.”
(Stephen, company B, 20/02/2007)

“...you get probably less frequent, smaller day to day stuff um but you would get every now and then something big...”
(Peter, company C, 11/10/2007)

The remaining three key account managers, Kevin, Max and Rose saw conflict as isolated incidents but were also able to describe in detail incidents of conflict as part of the CIT process and the analysis of these incidents shows their understanding of conflict to be more complex than they perceive. Moreover, Rose and Max explained that at any one time they could be handling any number of conflict situations, only Kevin found it difficult to describe a situation where more than one conflict might occur and that he saw conflict as rare isolated incidents.

“I’d say an isolated occasional incident, definitely.”
(Kevin, company C, 11/10/2007)

Of the five, only Max and Rose worked for the same organisation.

Key account managers across all of the participating organisations perceived conflict to be something they are constantly dealing with, which, when considering the findings associated with their perceived nature of conflict, has considerable implications. One of the main consequences of conflict within the organisation was determined to be frustration with continued frustration leading to de-motivation as presented in chapter 5. It therefore follows that if the key account manager is in an almost permanent state of conflict, the consequences could be extreme frustration and ultimately a job change through de-motivation, as presented in chapter 5 section 5.2.4; this will be discussed further in chapter 8.

7.3 SUMMARY

When describing conflict within their own organisations, the key account managers interviewed discussed the frequency and the degree (duration and intensity) of any conflicts encountered. For 27 of the 29 key account managers interviewed, incidents of conflict occurred frequently and not in isolation. Twenty-four saw conflict as a permanent feature of organisational life, something they are always dealing with. Only one of the key account managers interviewed had difficulty with this theme of the investigation but did manage to describe in detail three specific incidents of very complex conflicts in some detail.

7.4 FINDINGS: A SUMMARY

Chapter 5 shows that the findings from the analysis of the 29 transcripts and 112 critical incidents of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict described that there are both situational and departmental perceived sources of conflict from a KAM perspective. These are shown to be closely linked together with any one incident having a perceived source in more than one department sometimes with more than one situational or root cause. Each incident described was a unique situation, the incidents themselves forming the basis for the situational source. In addition to the perceived sources of conflict, an additional characteristic emerging from the data was that of the consequences of the conflict experienced. For the key account manager the conflicts were not always seen as a bad thing, sometimes stimulating creative competition within the organisation allowing objectives to be achieved. However, the perception of prolonged unnecessary conflict increased the negative perception leading to frustration and de-motivation. The findings relating to the perceived nature of conflict within the organisation form the foundation for those relating to behaviours, duration and intensity where there is a clear choice of behaviour for specific sources of conflict.

Chapter 6 shows the analysis of the 112 incidents where the key account manager in handling conflict has, to some extent, a behavioural predisposition, that of collaboration, a salesperson's instinctive behaviour within the organisation where the

relationships tend to be highly positively interdependent. Key account managers firstly adopt an approach which they perceive will get the best results for both parties involved. However, this collaborative approach does not always get the best result and is often used in conjunction with other behaviours where the key account manager perceives the outcome not being as desired. The key account manager shows an ability to analyse the situation and change behaviour accordingly with the preferred combination of behaviours being collaboration and competition. In more than half of the incidents describing this combination of behaviours, the outcome was perceived as having a positive effect. The key account manager also described nine other combinations of behaviour throughout the 112 incidents described.

Chapter 7 shows that from a KAM perspective, conflict is indeed inherent within the organisation, something the key account manager is always dealing with. Moreover, the findings show that key account managers can at any one time be handling any number of conflicts from various sources, each requiring a different set of behaviours in their management, requiring key account managers to change behavioural strategy depending upon their perception of the situation. Key account managers are in a position within the organisation where they can experience any number of conflict episodes at any one time from a wide range of situational and departmental sources.

These findings are discussed in chapter 8.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings and the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis through an exploration of the three main themes under investigation; i.e., an investigation into the key account manager's perception of conflict within the organisation, the nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. Investigating the key account manager's perception of which behaviours are most effective in dealing with incidents of conflict and an understanding of the abundance and frequency of occurrence of the conflict episodes as encountered by key account managers within their organisations. The principle research question to be answered through this research is:

How do key account managers perceive and manage inter-personal conflicts within their organisation?

This chapter is structured around the thematic framework (fig 3.3) and links back to the learning from the literature reviewed in chapter 2 to help explore and further understand the intra-organisational selling role of the key account manager and, specifically how interpersonal conflict is perceived and managed. Overall this chapter will discuss how the findings relate previous research and will validate, challenge or extend previous suggested theory or add new theoretical insights.

The first section of the discussion explores conflict characteristics as perceived by the key account managers involved, investigating affective, cognitive and process conflict types within the organisation (Jehn, 1995). The chapter then discusses the perceived consequences of the conflicts experienced in relation to the literature and previous research. The aim of this section is to determine whether the key account manager can differentiate between conflicts and use this distinction to select an appropriate management strategy.

The second section of the discussion explores the complexity perspective of conflict management recognises that different conflict situations may require different management behaviours, implying that managers can adapt to certain situations and call upon a much wider range of approaches to conflict management than previously thought. The second section of the discussion explores the behaviours the key account managers adopt in the management of conflict within the organisation, how effective the behavioural choices are and whether or not key account managers are able to continually adapt and change their behaviour to ensure the best possible outcome. The aim of this part of the research is to determine which behaviours under what circumstances are most effective positioning the findings relative the previous conflict management research which has taken a complexity perspective such as Van de Vliert *et al.*, (1999) and Euwema *et al.*, (2003).

The third section of the discussion investigates the abundance of conflict within the organisation as experienced by key account managers, which, together with the frequency of incidents experienced, takes the complexity perspective one step further to consider the occurrence of multiple incidents of conflict at any one time and suggests that conflict is an inherent condition of organisational life. The aim of this part of the research is to establish that conflict is indeed an inherent condition of organisational life and that conflict incidents do not occur as discrete isolated anomalous events validating Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint.

Finally, the relationship between the three themes is presented and the implications of this relationships for the key account manager's perception of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict and how it is managed. The chapter concludes by proposing a sequential contingency model for intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict based upon the research findings and discussion. The research contributions and implications then discussed in chapter 9.

8.2 THE NATURE OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT: A KAM PERSPECTIVE

This research is concerned with the internal conflict characteristics as perceived, experienced and discussed by the participating key account managers, the behaviours they adopted, the outcomes and the effects on subsequent conflict episodes. Although the individual and relationship contingency factors are identified, they remain outside the scope of this research and as such present an opportunity for future research. The critical stage in this research was to empirically establish that conflict episodes do not occur in isolation and that the key account manager may be handling any number of conflict episodes of different types with a unique nature at any one time. The CIT component was used to establish what behaviours, or conflict management strategies the key account manager adopts in dealing with these extremely complex, simultaneous, conflict episodes and how these behaviours affect current and subsequent conflict episodes.

The first theme under investigation was that of the key account managers' perception of the nature of conflict within the organisation. This first section of this research was designed to elicit information from the key account managers regarding the occurrence of relationship, task and process conflicts. This discussion examines why these conflicts arose; and looks at conflict composition, arguing that each conflict episode could be composed of more than one element of the three conflict types. In addition, the consequences of the conflicts experienced including the potential positive influence of conflict within the organisation are discussed. The following two sections discuss each in turn.

8.2.1 The Sources of Conflict

This research validates the previously suggested idea of the internal selling role (Vaaland and Hakansson, 2003; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005) and provides evidence supporting the importance of such a role. The participating key account managers describe their relationships across nine different departments and having to manage disputes in seven different situations. Consistent with these arguments, the current

research found that the key account manager, acting as the organisational boundary spanner (external and internal relationship manager), had a variable degree of interdependence with a wide range of functions both inside and outside of the organisation. Thus the current research has discovered that the participating key account managers frequently had to handle conflict within the organisation and that managing this conflict is a major component of their internal selling role:

“It’s hard enough dealing with the account without having to deal with all the other internal barriers that you perceive that shouldn’t really be there but for one of the several reasons I gave you are, which in essence is just a pretty simple and logical business process and that’s where I get, or that’s where I perceive the majority of my own internal conflicts to arise.” (Gerald, Incident No. 6, 15/02/2007)

This validates previous research into personal selling which also identified key account managers as central figures in the customer supplier relationship, working in a boundary spanning position acting as the main contact between their organisation and the customer (Leifer and Delbecq, 1978; Hakansson and Wootz, 1979; Vaaland and Hakansson, 2003; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005). In this research the customer was described as the main reason for all of the incidents of conflict which were described, the conflict occurring as a direct result of representing the customers’ needs internally. Thus the current research extends this and has demonstrated that the participating key account managers maintained a high level of commitment to the customer within their organisations acting as the customer advocate in the many internal relationships. Moreover, this commitment meant the key account manager had to communicate the customer message internally in a way which allowed other functions within the organisation to act accordingly and deliver what the key account manager perceived to be the best possible outcome for both customer and supplying organisation. The perceived conflict occurred when the other functions did not act as the key account manager expected, forcing the key account manager to adopt a management strategy to handle any issue. The findings have shown this to be the case where communication was an issue across the nine departments mentioned and where

resources required to maintain the customer relationship were scarce. This was most evident in the key account managers' relationship with marketing and finance:

"I think it's a communication issue, often either I or my opposite in the marketing department (customer marketing department) have not kept each other informed..."
(Vincent, Incident No. 71, 05/02/2008)

Thus the current research validates the previously suggested idea that the key account manager needs to maintain effective internal relationships acting as the customer advocate in order to externally meet the customer requirement (Kothandaraman and Wilson, 2000). Moreover, the current research extends this showing how, in order to maintain their customer orientation and meet their objectives, the key account managers involved had to understand and effectively manage a wide range of conflicts. In order to achieve this, the key account managers had to perceive and characterise the conflicts encountered in order to adopt the most appropriate behaviour, i.e. the behaviour most likely to have a positive outcome:

"...because you've very much got this internal and external environment where you've got a customer who wants one thing and as a business we may want to do another thing. That's going to create conflict." (James, company E, 01/02/2008)

Previous research into the nature of this intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict has identified three different conflict types: task (objective), relationship (affective) and process, together with a theory for conflict composition, and has presented the consequences of dealing with this conflict as both functional and dysfunctional (Jehn, 1995; Jehn and Chatman, 2000). The critique of the literature presented in chapter 2 argues for a conflict taxonomy which supports the previous research and avoids confusion over terminology. The proposed conflict types were; *cognitive* conflict describing conflicts concerned with what people know and understand about their tasks at hand, roles, objectives and functions; *affective* conflict, describing conflicts concerned with what people think and feel about their relationships, or the emotional

element; and *process* conflict, relating to conflicts arising from the organisation structure, strategy or culture, thus, the stage on which those experiencing the conflict act (Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Jehn and Chatman, 2000).

In reaching this taxonomy the literature review discussed the issues arising from the wide range of terms used to describe these different conflict types and in doing so covered the dimensions of conflict proposed by Jameson (1999) who suggested three dimensions for conflict: *content*, *relational* and *situational*. The content dimension covers the characteristics of conflict or what conflict is about and considers a task element, objective and subjective issues, together with policy interpretation and organisational change. The relational dimension considers the subjective, perceived variables within the relationships of the actors involved together with the degree of interdependence and whether the conflict is dyadic or multi-party. Finally the situational dimension examines the variables which may be most relevant in selecting an appropriate conflict management strategy. These include time pressure, the potential impact of the conflict episode, the degree of escalation and the range of options available in the management of the conflict episode (Jameson, 1999).

This research extends the previous research by adding the key account managers' perspective of the characteristics of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. This research shows that the participating key account managers did not distinguish one conflict from another by objectivity versus subjectivity, rather they distinguished conflict by where it came from and why, that is to say by perceived source. The key account managers involved in the current research subsequently identified two dimensions related to their perceived *sources of conflict* as being critical in their perception of conflict within the organisation. Thus the current research extends the existing, previously suggested, conflict taxonomy by adding *departmental* and *situational* dimensions to the classification of conflict by perceived source., table 8.1 shows how this current taxonomy adds to the previous literature extending table 2.4; the summary of conflict typologies.

| Date | Author(s) | Conflict Typology |
|------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2002 | Tellefsen and Eyuboglu | Goal Conflicts |
| 2004 | Bradford, <i>et al.</i> , | Interpersonal, Task |
| 2003 | De Dreu and Weingart | Relationship, Task |
| 2004 | Reid, <i>et al.</i> | Relationship, Task |
| 2004 | Tidd, <i>et al.</i> | Relationship, Task |
| 2004 | Medina, <i>et al.</i> , | Relationship, Task |
| 2005 | Guerra, <i>et al.</i> , | Relationship, Task |
| 2008 | Speakman | Departmental and Situational |

Table 8.1 An Extended Summary of the Conflict Typologies

The departmental dimension related to the relationships (both internal and external) between the key account manager and other individuals or groups while the situational dimension of conflict related to the micro environment in which the key account managers operated. In contrast to the conflict taxonomy argued for in the literature review and consistent with Jameson's (1999) dimensional approach, the language of the participating key account managers and their perception of conflict led them to describe and characterise conflict by where they believe the conflict came from and why, rather than associating conflict with specific tasks, objectives, emotions or feelings.

Situational Sources of Conflict

The key account managers interviewed perceived seven situational sources of conflict within the organisation as the reason *why* they believed conflict occurred: *communication, people, resources, roles, goals, self interest and culture*.. Jehn (1995) defined task conflict as occurring where there is a disagreement over the objective tasks being performed which include differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions. Consistent with this, the current research suggests that the key account managers classified conflict using a situational dimension where the situations described such as task-related conflict, were rooted in disagreements over viewpoints, ideas and objectives relating to roles, goals, objectives miscommunication and the people involved. When viewed this way the situational dimension was something the

participating key account managers could specifically identify and work on to achieve their objectives:

“I actually get a buzz out of it, to be honest. It doesn’t bother me at all, I quite like being in that kind of situation, and for me it’s all about building relationships with people and it’s networking together.” (Carlos, Incident No. 50, 15/10/2007)

Jehn (1995) went on to suggest another conflict type, relationship, which dealt with interpersonal incompatibilities, an emotional element including animosity, tension and annoyances within the group which did not relate to a specific task or objective. Again, consistent with this approach, the situational dimension for the key account manager also had elements of relationship conflict. Specifically the situational dimension contained incidents which described how conflict occurs because of the way people are, the way they act in certain situations, and occasions where there was an element of self interest. In this research the participating key account managers classified one type of conflict according to the situation in which it is manifest, the reason why it happens (situational conflict), they experienced conflict containing both relationship and task types within the situational dimension thus extending the two previously suggested taxonomies; i.e., task versus relationship (Jehn, 1995) and the dimensions (Jameson, 1999), by bringing them together. However, it was not the only dimension they used for classification of conflict – they also discussed a departmental dimension further extending both Jehn’s (1995) and Jameson’s (1999) taxonomies.

Departmental Dimension of Intra-organisational, Interpersonal Conflict

The second perceived source of conflict for the participating key account managers was that of the department with which they were interacting. The key account managers perceived nine departmental sources of conflict; *marketing, senior management, other key account managers, finance, production (and planning), NPD (and technical), supply chain, customer services and human resources; i.e.,* where they believed the conflict came from. Previous research has acknowledged that

relationships between disputants need to be considered in conflict taxonomy, the most prominent relationship element being the degree of interdependence (Yarbrough and Wilmot, 1995; Jameson, 1999). Furthermore, previous research suggests that where the degree of interdependence is greater the parties involved are more likely to pursue their differences and the likelihood of conflict is also greater, this being described as an organisational norm (Morrill, 1991; Jansen *et al.*, 1999). This perceived degree of interdependence is a component of the relationship type of conflict and how individuals feel about their relationships (Jehn, 1995). The current research validates this, showing that the key account management structure within the organisation involved key account managers in having to influence non-direct reports across a wide range of functions in order to achieve their objectives. This interdependence within the organisation, following Morrill (1991) and Jansen *et al.*, (1999), resulted in the frequently encountered incidents of conflict experienced by the participating key account managers:

“It’s hard enough dealing with the account without having to deal with all the other internal barriers that you perceive that shouldn’t really be there but for one of the several reasons I gave you are...” (Gerald, Incident No. 6, 15/02/2007)

However, the key account managers involved perceived a situational and departmental source for each incident of conflict described. That is to say, for the key account manager, each incident of conflict has a unique composition having a specific departmental and situational source validating Jehn and Chatman’s (2000) suggestion of conflict composition.

Conflict Composition

Previous research has suggested that each episode of conflict will have a unique structure or composition being made up of varying proportions of the three different conflict types, task, relationship and process (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). The current research extends this, suggesting that for the key account managers involved, conflict

is perceived as having multiple sources where each source as previously discussed has both task and relationship elements. Moreover, this research also shows that the participating key account managers frequently only associated one departmental source to a specific episode but may associate multiple situational sources. That is to say, for the participating key account managers the perceived source of conflict may have been linked to one particular department for a number of different reasons. This takes conflict composition beyond two dimensions (fig 2.5) and presents conflict episodes as having a composition of different conflict types while being multi-dimensional in terms of perceived source. To this end the current research indicates that the key account managers perceived and characterised intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict in a far more complex way than previous literature into conflict taxonomy and composition has suggested, combining both a dimensional and content classification system.

8.2.2 The Consequences of Conflict

Previous research suggests that the perceived nature of any conflict within the organisation determines the selected conflict management strategy, which in turn influences the outcome and ultimately the perceived consequence of the conflict experienced (Jameson, 1999; Amason, 1996). These consequences can be both functional (positive) and dysfunctional (negative) in their effect.

The current research extends previous research, showing the key account managers in this research viewed conflict into two ways – negative and positive. From the review of the literature we know that conflict can have both positive (functional) and negative (dysfunctional) effects upon those who have to deal with it. Research exploring attitudes towards conflict has considered the consequences of conflict for individual and team performance (Jehn, 1995), showing that conflict can be perceived and felt in different ways by the different actors experiencing the conflict episode (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Thus, conflict is situationally and perceptually relative.

Negative consequences of conflict

Previous research has shown how the classical conflict theorists have taken the view that conflict exists in opposition to cooperation and that conflict is wholly dysfunctional with the focus being on resolution rather than management (e.g. Pondy, 1966; Bradford, 1999). These negatively-perceived conflict episodes can increase tension and antagonism between individuals and lead to a lack of focus on the required task (Saavedra *et al.*, 1993; Wall and Nolan, 1986) while avoidance and suppression can also have long term negative consequences such as stifling creativity, promoting groupthink and causing an escalation in any existing conflict (De Dreu, 1997). Furthermore, previous research has shown that where interdependence is negative (where one party wins at the expense of the other), then any conflict will be viewed negatively (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). The perception of conflict will also be negative where the conflict is personal, resulting in personality clashes, increased stress and frustration. This type of relationship conflict can impede the decision making process as individuals focus on the personal aspects rather than the task related issues (Jehn, 1995).

The current research validates the previous research showing that for the participating key account managers, conflict is also perceived in this way. By far the most common consequence was a feeling of frustration. This feeling was mentioned in each interview and across all of the incidents described. The key account manager's frustration increased when conflicts were repeated over and over again, where there was a greater perceived degree of negative interdependence in favour of the departmental sources of conflict, consistent with Janssen *et al.*, (1999). When the key account managers perceived constant barriers with any one department they were dealing with this led to frustration and the negative perception of conflict. The key account managers became more frustrated when they could not achieve their objectives because another party continually created barriers; i.e., a high degree of received negative interdependence. Moreover, from the key account managers' perspective, this frustration was perceived to be avoidable and the perceived sources of conflict causing the frustration were believed to be unnecessary.

*“...just a real frustration, does that answer the question..?
...just frustrated I think was probably the key feeling. It was
just frustration in the fact that again to my mind there was
a simple conclusion, a simple solution which was just
deliver the stock, yeah?” (Carl, Incident No. 31,
11/10/2007)*

The current research also shows that this increased level of frustration led to another perceived negative consequence of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict, that of de-motivation. Where the key account managers did not develop and learn from the experience and the feeling of frustration increased, this was followed by an increased desire to question their position and ultimately to change jobs. Given the training and development investment in key account managers as strategic business managers of major customers, this is a most alarming consequence which has not previously been proposed in a key account management context.

However, for the key account managers conflict was not all negative; in fact, each of the key account managers actually described the positive consequences of conflict first, before they described the negative consequences. This is an interesting issue, as conflict is routinely presented in much of the literature, and certainly in practitioner discussion, as a negative. In the current research, it was in fact first identified as positive and only then as negative. For example:

*“I actually get a buzz out of it, to be honest. It doesn't
bother me at all...” (Carlos, Incident No. 50, 15/10/2007)*

Positive consequences of conflict

More recent research has suggested that in contrast to the more negative, classical perception of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict outlined previously, that certain types of conflict or conflict in certain situations can have a positive effect upon relationships. Moreover, this recent research suggests that the best route to this positive outcome is through acceptance and effective management of the conflict,

rather than avoidance or suppression (De Dreu, 1997). The current research validates these previous findings, showing that the key account managers' perception of conflict was not wholly negative and that they can find the challenge of having to deal with conflict to be a stimulating learning experience:

“Conflict, it’s time consuming and sometimes unnecessary but also it’s a great learning piece as well...” (Jane, Incident No. 74, 06/02/2008)

This research demonstrates that when key account managers experienced conflict they had to address the major issues, be more creative, and see different aspects of the problem, thereby mitigating groupthink and stimulating creativity consistent with De Dreu, (1997). Thus, this research also validates the suggestion that where there is high positive interdependence (an agreeable outcome for both parties), the conflict episode will be viewed much more positively (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). This research also shows that the key account managers adopted a strategy through which both parties involved (the customer and the key account manager's organisation) achieved what was required; they actively encouraged working together within the organisation to resolve issues and meet the customer need thereby creating the high state of positive interdependence. The key account managers saw conflict within the organisation as a challenge and as something that came with the job. Their expectation was that they had to deal with a wide range of issues across the departments within their organisations and saw this as a challenge. They also believed it was this challenge which kept them going, avoiding frustration and giving them the drive to achieve the required results both for their customer and their own organisations. They perceived conflict as a source of learning, where individuals from different teams came together to develop solutions to problems, working together to achieve the best possible outcome.

Previous research considers the consequences of conflict together with the conflict types, suggesting that task-related conflicts are more productive within the organisation since they stimulate creativity and mitigate groupthink, whereas the more emotional relationship conflicts are allowed to fester, generally have much more

negative consequences and are harder to manage. Furthermore, Jehn (1995) argues that task- and issue-based cognitive conflict can have a positive effect on team or group performance. Groups who experience cognitive conflict have a greater understanding of the assignments at hand and are able to make better decisions in dealing with issues as they arise (Simons and Peterson, 2000).

This research extends previous research, showing that, for the key account managers, the conflicts arising from the different departments were handled with different degrees of effectiveness. Taking the departmental dimension of conflict, the majority of the conflicts which were perceived to have come from marketing, finance, production (and planning) and NPD were resolved with a perceived positive outcome while those conflicts arising from other key account managers and senior management had a higher proportion of negative outcomes. Considering the situational dimension as the perceived source of the conflict, it is those conflicts relating to the people involved and their roles which were managed with a perceived negative outcome which validates the previous research suggesting the negative impact of relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995).

Previous research has also shown that, when individuals are exposed to a 'devil's advocate', they are able to make better judgments than those not exposed (Schwenk, 1990). Schultz-Hardt *et al.*, (2002) suggested that groups make better decisions when they started in disagreement rather than agreement with the conflict having a functional (useful and positive) outcome. This research validates this perspective, suggesting that the key account manager when acting as the customer advocate had to persuade other functions within the business to adopt new strategies in order to meet the customer need. In doing so, the key account manager was acting as the 'devils advocate', stimulating creativity, rising to the challenge and finding a mutually-beneficial solution. This scenario applied to both the situational and departmental dimensions, suggesting that where there is high positive interdependence a mutually beneficial solution could be found.

One more perceived consequence of the conflict experienced by the key account managers which had both negative and positive outcomes was that of increased

competitive behaviour or competition. The key account managers perceived that engaging in conflict increased competitive behaviour between those involved and when working together to achieve a mutually beneficial solution the outcome was perceived to be a positive. However, when the increased competition was between individuals with opposing goals then the consequences were perceived more negatively and were reflected clearly in the situational source of conflict, self interest:

“...sometimes a level of competitiveness that makes you feel that way, personal competitiveness, can often, or sometimes make you lose sight of the real end goal.”
(Gerald, Incident No. 4, 15/02/2007)

8.2.3 The Abundance of Conflict

The aim of the third theme of this research was to explore the frequency and abundance of the conflict incidents experienced by the key account managers within their organisations. It was through the investigation of this theme that the key new theoretical insights into intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict were achieved. The majority of the previous research into conflict and its management within the organisation has treated the incidents of conflict as discrete and isolated, focusing on the characteristics of the conflict episode and how it is managed (Pondy, 1989; 1992). For example, the research by Jehn and Chatman (2000) into conflict composition and team performance does not consider the occurrence of any simultaneous conflict episodes, where one incident is under investigation at any one time. However, Pondy (1992) as he reflected on his own research and subsequent work of others, suggested that conflict episodes may not occur as isolated incidents in an otherwise cooperative world and that they could be a constant feature of organisational life with multiple conflict episodes occurring at any one point in time. To date there has been little empirical research adopting this alternative viewpoint and establishing conflict as an inherent, complex phenomenon within the organisation with different episodes occurring simultaneously. The current research addresses this gap.

Frequency of conflicts encountered

Building on Pondy's (1989) reflection and the recent research adopting a complexity perspective in conflict management research, this research, which is based upon empirical evidence, adds new theoretical insights to conflict theory showing that the key account managers in the study frequently had to handle more than one incident of conflict at any one time. Furthermore the results show that, from the key account managers' perspective, conflict was something they were dealing with all of the time; it was a constant feature of their organisational life, an inherent condition of their function within the organisation and, as Van De Vliert *et al.*, (1999) argue, conflict is omnipresent within the organisation to the extent that it is almost taken for granted:

"I've lost count, probably, loads probably, in terms of conflicts I've probably had six or seven in one go ..."
(Stuart, company A, 25/01/2007)

"...like a piece of string so, could be, could be any. Could be, you know, could be ten in a day." (Robert, company F, 27/02/2008)

A clear consequence of the current research is that it provides evidence in favour of a complexity approach to conflict in which conflict is a regular feature of organisational life, rather than being a departure from the norm. This, in turn, has consequences for future research into conflict, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Duration and Intensity

This research also adds new theoretical insights into conflict theory with regard to the intensity of the conflicts encountered and how long they last. The key account managers discussed the intensity of the conflict they experienced together with an indication of the duration of the incidents. They described having to handle multiple conflicts at any one time and went on to explain that they were not all the same, some were perceived to be more trivial than others or lasting longer than others:

“... it’s difficult to describe really because there’s conflicts that go on within a conflict, especially when I was project managing this because, you know, you tend to get an issue that crops up with an individual that you know then has implications on other people and then that can start conflicts between them and also with them and yourself, them and the person that’s, so it kind of gets into a little triangle almost.” (Peter, company C, 11/10/2007)

The participating key account managers perceived each of the incidents of conflict described as unique both in perceived dimensional source (nature), duration and intensity.

This research suggested a conceptual visualisation in concluding the literature review of conflict within the organisation which is now re-presented in figure 8.1. This model provides a three-dimensional representation of the phenomenon under investigation adopting Pondy’s (1989) alternative view of conflict as a constant and inherent component of organisational life. The model shows how, at any one given point in time (the X axis), there could be a number of conflict episodes experienced (A to D), each with a different intensity (the Z axis) and duration (X axis). In addition, following Jehn and Chatman (2000) and the theoretical extensions discussed earlier, each conflict episode could have a unique composition, being made up of different proportions of the two perceived dimensional sources together with the cognitive, affective and process elements.

This research has shown that for the participating key account managers, conflict was classified by source in two dimensions, where it came from and why, providing a departmental and situational dimension to the intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict experienced. Key account managers perceived multiple sources of conflict during any one specific incident and had a perception of the potential consequences of the incident they were handling. These findings support the conceptual visualisation presented in Chapter 2.

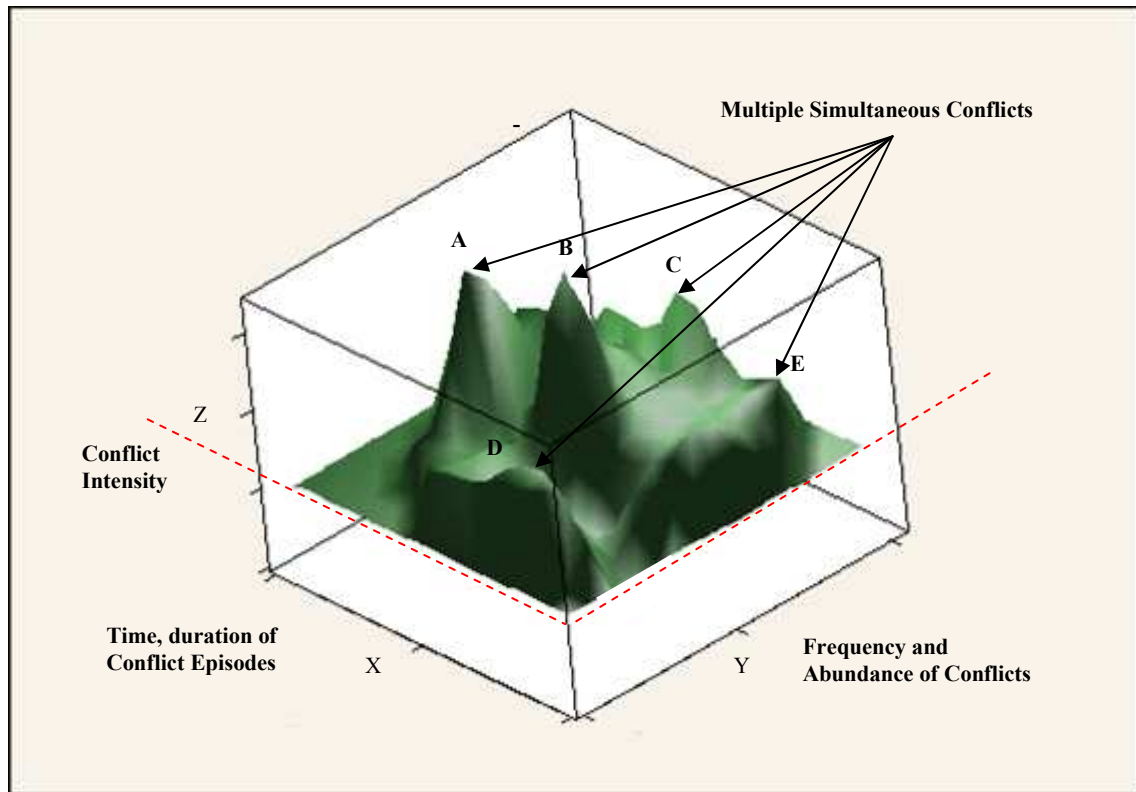


Figure 8.1 The Nature of Intra-organisational, Interpersonal Conflict: A KAM Perspective

Consistent with more recent research, the current findings support the notion that functional conflict has shifted the field research away from conflict avoidance and resolution and towards a consideration of the management behaviours which can be adopted in dealing with conflict in order to gain the best possible outcome. This leads into a discussion of the behaviours adopted by the key account managers when handling conflict within the organisation and how effective these behaviours were, since, as suggested by De Dreu (1997), it is the way in which the conflict episodes are managed which determines the outcome – functional or dysfunctional.

When considering the best behaviour to adopt in any situation, the key account manager considers all of the options available and what will result in the best possible outcome, with the exception of the pursuit of self interest where the only perceived outcome is an outcome predetermined by the key account manager. The current research suggests that key account managers were constantly dealing with some form

of conflict within the organisation, some perceived to be more important than others, some longer lasting than others. In handling these multiple, simultaneous conflict episodes the key account manager adapted to each unique set of circumstances and chose a set of behaviours which they felt would result in the best possible outcome. The behavioural choice was made through experience, with previous conflict episodes providing a learning opportunity for the key account manager and increasing subsequent conflict management skills.

8.3 KAM: THE MANAGEMENT OF INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

The second theme under investigation was the effectiveness of the behaviours adopted by the key account managers in the management of conflict within the organisation, an exploration of the behavioural choices made, and whether or not key account managers were able to continually adapt and change their behaviour in order to ensure the best possible outcome. It is generally accepted throughout the previous interpersonal conflict management research that there are five fundamental interpersonal conflict management styles: avoiding; accommodating; compromising; competing; and collaborating (Thomas, 1976; Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). This part of the discussion will examine the key account managers' perspective on which behaviour was most effective and whether a combination of these behaviours could be used to influence the outcome.

8.3.1 KAM: Conflict Management Behaviours

Conflict management has been defined as the actions in which a person typically engages, in response to perceived interpersonal conflict, in order to achieve a desired goal (Thomas, 1976) and previous research has suggested that it is the way in which conflict episodes are addressed which determines the outcome (Amason, 1996). However, there is disagreement between researchers as to the degree to which managers can and do adapt, using different conflict management behaviours in different situations. Previous research has considered three different approaches: the 'one best way' perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984); the contingency or

situational perspective (Thomas, 1992; Munduate *et al.*, 1999; Nicotera, 1993); and the complexity or conglomerated perspective (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999; Euwema *et al.*, 2003). The one best way perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984) is based on the theory that any one conflict management style is more effective than another concentrating on that one behaviour. In contrast, the complexity perspective considers changes in conflict management behaviour throughout any interaction based upon any changes in the micro environment and knowledge of how changing interdependent modes of behaviour will affect the outcome (Medina *et al.*, 2004). In this discussion each will be considered in turn from the key account managers' perspective.

The 'one best way' perspective

Sternberg and Soriano (1984) proposed what is arguably the simplest perspective on conflict management behaviour, the 'one best way' perspective, which suggests that individuals have a particular preferred behavioural predisposition to the way in which they handle incidents of interpersonal conflict and that the manner in which individuals handle conflict therefore remains constant across conflict episodes. The 'one best way' perspective goes on to suggest that collaborative behaviours will have the best outcome most of the time because of the high concern for both of the parties involved.

The current research validates this position, suggesting that the participating key account managers adopted the behaviour which they believed to be the one most likely to result in a positive outcome from their perspective. When they described the behaviours adopted in the management of conflict all of the participating key account managers described collaborative behaviours as their first choice. This is consistent with the 'one best way' perspective, since collaboration is always positively interdependent having a joint best outcome, frequently described as 'win/win' by the key account managers.

Previous research has suggested that the problem-solving or collaborative style is generally, taking the one best way perspective, considered to be the behaviour best suited to reaching a constructive solution since it unites the interests of both parties

(Van de Vliert, *et al.*, 1995). The current research also validates this, showing that the participating key account managers described their personal selling techniques from practicing win / win negotiations with customers in order to get the best possible outcome from their negotiations, as having had an influence on their internal behaviour. When describing their internal selling skills the same approach was taken, focusing on the win / win, resulting in the collaborative behavioural choice. However, the described adopted behaviour was not always collaboration even though for key account managers it was their behaviour of choice, nor did the collaborative behaviours always result in a positive outcome. In fact, where collaboration was described by the participants, more than a quarter of these collaborations were perceived to have had a negative outcome. In this respect the current research challenges the previous research, suggesting that there is no ‘one best way’ which suits all circumstances (see tables 6.3 and 6.4).

However, current research also challenges the ‘one best way’ perspective suggesting that in certain some circumstances, the key account manager adopts different behaviours dependent upon how the source of the conflict is perceived and what the perceived outcome may be. In contrast the ‘one best way’ approach suggests that a more aggressive, competitive, negatively interdependent approach (in fact, any conflict management approach other than collaborative) results in suboptimal outcomes (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). This research suggests that the participating key account managers frequently adopt a more competitive behaviour to force the desired outcome. Twenty-one of the respondents referred to this behavioural choice in 35 incidents with over half having a perceived positive outcome. Thus the current research challenges this, showing that this is not the case for the key account managers involved. The current research shows that the key account managers perceived conflict in a complex manner, as having multiple sources, a unique composition and that their behaviour choice was influenced by their perception of the conflict characteristics:

“I suppose gentle at first if you like and then, and then get more pushy as and when I need to, need to be and that

would be...depend on the situation you know, what is happening...” (Dirk, Incident No. 12, 30/01/2007)

The contingency perspective

Previous research suggests that the ‘one best way’ perspective is limited and does not explain how managers are able to collaborate if they have different behavioural predispositions, nor does it provide evidence that collaboration always produces the best outcome (Thomas, 1992). In contrast to the ‘one best way’ perspective, in which collaborative behaviours are always preferred, the contingency perspective maintains that the optimal conflict management behaviour depends on the specific conflict situation, and that what is appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another (Thomas, 1992). In this paradigm, the best approach is dependent upon the particular set of circumstances.

The current research shows that the participating key account managers adopted a behaviour which they perceived to be the most suitable for the situation they were experiencing which is consistent with the ‘one best way’ perspective.. However, the current research also challenges this in that the key account managers also adopted behaviours which did not suit the situation and would not have had the best possible outcome. This was demonstrated clearly where the behavioural choice was avoidance or accommodating when dealing with conflicts having a perceived situational source relating to people, goals and roles (see tables 6.2 and 6.3), and the perceived outcome was highly negative:

“I was almost passive and, you know, backing off a little bit thinking I don’t really want to have these conversations and you know just trying to hide I guess.” (Wendy, Incident No. 47, 15/10/2007)

The avoiding and compromising strategies left the key account manager at a disadvantage, in that the issues were resolved but resulted in the perception of a negative outcome. In this respect the current research challenges both the ‘one best

way' and contingency perspectives, in that the individuals involved selected a conflict management behaviour which did not produce the best possible outcome nor did it suit the particular set of circumstances. Thus, for the key account managers in this research, conflict management behaviours were regarded as a matter of choice rather than innate (as in the 'one best way' view), or dependent on a specific set of circumstances and a resulting positive outcome.

Until recently, previous conflict research has been heavily influenced by the 'one best way' and contingency perspectives, focusing on the effectiveness of a single mode of conflict management behaviour (primarily collaboration) in a single conflict episode (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). The current research shows that for the participating key account managers working within their organisations acting as the customer advocate, their behavioural choice when dealing with conflict was not always collaboration nor was it always a choice made in order to ensure the best possible outcome. Thus, the 'one best way' and contingency perspectives do not offer a real-world view in which managers can and do change their behaviours, perhaps trying different approaches to break a deadlock or to improve their bargaining position. Thus the 'one best way' and contingency perspectives fail to take into account the changing circumstances in the micro environment and the subsequent influence this may have upon the actions of the individuals involved in any subsequent conflict episodes (Olekalns *et al.*, 1996).

The complexity perspective

Since neither of the previous approaches approach makes allowance for the passage of time, for changes within the micro environment, or of multiple simultaneous conflict episodes, a more complex perspective needs to be considered where conflict and the response to conflict can be viewed as dynamic and changing over time. Therefore, for the key account managers dealing with conflict within their organisations neither the 'one best way' nor the contingency perspective would always produce optimal results. Moreover, if conflict does not occur discretely and individually as previous research suggests (Pondy, 1989; 1992) then the existing approaches do not describe the world as managers actually experience it. In order to

address these shortcomings of the traditional research into conflict management and to incorporate the complexity perspective, research has had to move beyond two dimensions (Sheppard, 1992). In this perspective each conflict episode is considered to have unique characteristics and composition which may change over time requiring a specific adaptable approach in order to obtain the best possible outcome.

More recent research taking this complexity perspective has suggested that conflict episodes may not occur in isolation (Euwema *et al.*, 2003; Jehn and Chatman, 2000) and that conflict episodes are more complex and dynamic in both composition and management requirement than previously suggested, arguing that the traditional approach under-represents the individual's assertive modes of conflict management behaviour. This complexity perspective characterises conflict within the organisation as continuous and multi-dimensional. In such circumstances, the behavioural style in dealing with any one conflict episode may vary during, or between, conflict episodes (Medina *et al.*, 2004; Nicotera, 1993). The current research validates this suggestion with the results showing that the key account managers were able to change their behaviour during a conflict episode when they believed the adopted behaviour was not achieving the desired results, or where they perceived a change in the micro-environment or relationship dynamic. The findings show that 22 of the respondents made 29 references to multiple conflict management behaviours across 33 specific incidents. In doing so they also described those incidents which had a positive and negative outcome (see table 6.5).

Recent work by Van de Vliert *et al.*, (1997) and Medina *et al.*, (2004) has expanded current theory through consideration of the complexity perspective. The complexity perspective argues that any reaction to a conflict episode consists of multiple behavioural components rather than one single conflict management behaviour. In the complexity perspective, using a mixture of accommodating, avoiding, competing, compromising and collaborating behaviours throughout the conflict episode is suggested to be the rule rather than the exception (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997).

To date, studies taking a complexity approach to conflict management have adopted one of three different complexity perspectives. The first examines simultaneous

complexity and how different combinations of behaviours affect the outcome of the conflict (Munduate *et al.*, 1999). The second complexity approach focuses on the point of behavioural change and the outcome, examining either the behavioural phases through which the participants of a conflict episode pass, or apply temporal complexity to look at the point at which behavioural style changes and the effect on the conflict episode (Olekalns *et al.*, 1996). The third approach is the sequential complexity or conglomerated perspective, which is concerned with the different modes of conflict management behaviour, how they are combined, and at what point they change during the interaction. They all share one thing in common, the suggestion that conflict management behaviours can be changed during an incident, that multiple behaviours are frequently adopted in order to increase the potential for a positive outcome. This research shows that the key account managers' did adapt to certain situations and that they were able to use multiple conflict management behaviours during and across conflict episodes.

8.3.2 Multiple Conflict Management Behaviours

The complexity perspective of conflict management behaviour moves beyond the contingency perspective, taking into account that conflict management behaviours can change over time (as the incident evolves) and the effectiveness of the behavioural sequence involved.

In their study of multiple conflict management behaviours Van de Vliert *et al.* (1999) proposed the conglomerated complexity perspective, considering the dyadic effectiveness of collaboration and competing behaviours. Their research suggests that under certain circumstances, alternation between collaborating and competing behaviours until a state of collaboration produces the desired outcome will be the most effective approach. The current research extends this perspective in that the most common sets of behaviour described by the key account managers were collaboration and competing. However, the outcome from the key account management perspective was not always positive, with the findings indicating that the outcome is just as likely to be negative as positive (see table 6.5).

The current research shows that in half of the cases where agitation was perceived to be the likely outcome, using a combination of competing and collaborating resulted in a possible change in outcome. Van de Vliert *et al.*, (1999), however, did not consider other behavioural combinations and the potential outcome. In total this study revealed eight combinations⁶ of behaviour (excluding mediation) with more of the combinations having a negative outcome than positive, these are summarised in table 8.1.

| Combination of Behaviours used | No. of Respondents Referencing | No. of +ve Incidents Referencing | No. of -ve Incidents Referencing |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Collaborating and Avoiding</i> | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| <i>Collaborating and Competing</i> | 12 | 8 | 7 |
| <i>Competing and Avoiding</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| <i>Competing and Accommodating</i> | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Collaborating and Accommodating</i> | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| <i>Collaborating and Compromising</i> | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Avoiding and Accommodating</i> | 6 | 1 | 6 |
| <i>Competing and Avoiding</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| TOTALS | 29 | 14 | 19 |
| <i>Total number of respondents referring to multiple behaviours in the management of specific incidents 22 (Some described more than one set of multiple behaviours)</i> | | | |

Table 8.2 Summary of Described Multiple Conflict Management Behaviours

This is consistent with the key account managers' perception that the management process was not achieving the desired results prompting a behavioural change. The key account managers described collaboration and accommodation in four incidents where they perceived collaboration as a single behaviour was not achieving the desired outcome. This research shows that when a behaviour is combined with accommodating it changes the perceived outcome. However, in this research,

⁶ Mathematically with the five behaviours there are ten double combinations, ten treble, five quadruple and one five-fold combination of behaviours, giving 26 in total.

competing was perceived to be the right complementary behaviour validating the previous research by Van de Vliert *et al.*, (1999).

In contrast the third highlighted combination of avoidance and accommodation had a largely negative outcome. Here the key account managers described incidents over which they had little influence and therefore chose to collaborate and avoid the situation rather than deal with it. The reason for the perceived negative outcomes could be because the study only considers the key account managers' perception. If a dyadic perspective had been taken, it is possible that the other parties involved would have perceived a more positive outcome since the behaviours suited their objectives. Thus, the current research adds new theoretical insights to the conglomerated complexity perspective in that the key account managers were able to adopt a number of conflict management behaviours throughout the duration of several of the experienced incidents of conflict. This is a challenge to the conglomerated complexity perspective and provides empirical evidence in support of the sequential contingency perspective.

8.4 A SEQUENTIAL CONTINGENCY PERSPECTIVE

This research extends the previous adaptive selling research into the external selling situation, showing that the key account managers demonstrated adaptive behaviour within the organisation in the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, the literature review showed that from the salespersons' external, customer perspective the challenge is to recognise and manage conflict when it arises with the centre of attention being on maintaining long term relationships (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). The current research extends this theoretical perspective showing that the same applied to their internal relationships which also have to be maintained in order to continually meet the customers' demands. Furthermore, previous research has shown that salespeople who are able to adapt their style to the unique selling situations experienced with each of their customer contacts will have a strategic advantage over those who can not or will not adapt (Miles *et al.*, 1990). That is to say, those salespeople who are able to and do change their behaviours based on perceived information during a sales interaction will be more successful. These salespeople

increase their performance through practising adaptive selling, the altering of sales behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation (Spiro & Weitz, 1990).

Applying the same principles to the management of conflict within the organisation, the key account managers who were able to adapt their behaviour to each situation and either use any single or conglomerated behaviour which they perceived would have the best possible outcome were better suited to dealing with the issues of conflict within the organisation.

In considering conflict as an inherent condition of organisational life (Pondy, 1989; (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999) a fourth complexity perspective is proposed – a sequential contingency perspective for the management of multiple, simultaneous conflicts adapted from the contingency framework for adaptive selling behaviour (Weitz, 1981), this is presented in figure 8.2.

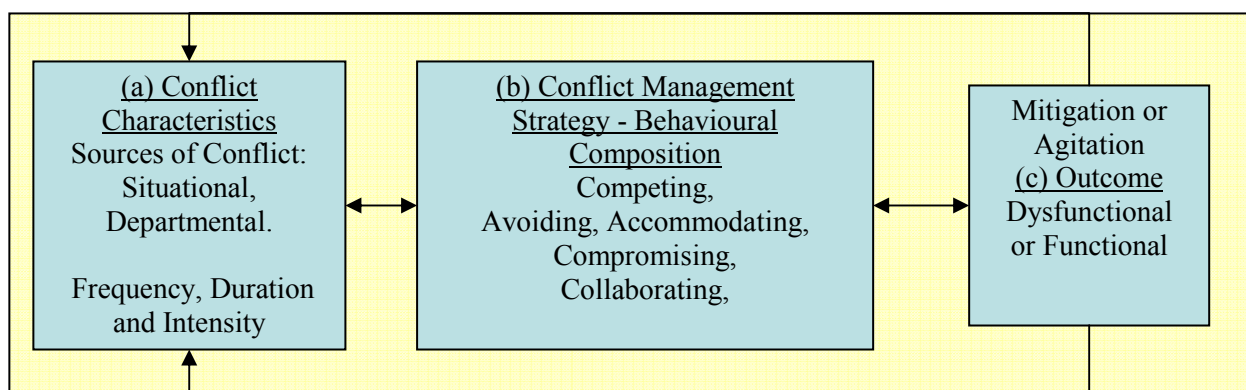


Fig (8.2) KAM: A Sequential Contingency Model for Intra-organisational, Interpersonal Conflict Management

The basic elements of the framework are those which were explored in this research (a) the conflict episode characteristics, the key account managers' perceived nature of

intra-organisational interpersonal conflict. From this research this is the key account managers' perceived sources of the conflict, the duration and intensity; i.e., the characteristics of the unique incidents of conflict which directly influence the key account managers' behavioural choices; (b) the conflict management behaviours adopted either as single or conglomerated behaviours; and (c) the outcome of the conflict episodes, positive or negative (functional or dysfunctional), based upon the choice of behaviour(s). In some circumstances the incident of conflict experienced may not be resolved and the issue may be agitated or mitigated as an outcome in which case key account managers would reconsider their assessment of the conflict they are managing and consider adapting their behavioural style. The management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict from a key account management perspective becomes an iterative process where key account managers continually adapt to all existing conflicts and choose behaviours to best suit the situation, based upon previous experience and their perception of the outcome.

In addition to the elements explored in this research, the model also proposes two other elements which may influence the behavioural choices of the key account manager – (d) the characteristics of the individuals involved, their skills, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, roles, goals and any behavioural predisposition; and (e) the characteristics of the relationship(s) in which the incidents of conflict occur. The degree of interdependence, trust, power, commitment and satisfaction will all influence key account managers' perception of any subsequent conflict episodes.

From the results of this research the basic postulate of the model is that conflict is a constant and inherent condition of the organisation; i.e., conflict episodes not occurring as isolated incidents. Additionally the effectiveness of the conflict management behaviours is contingent upon and moderated by the perceived nature of the conflict, the characteristics and relationships of the key account managers involved and any learning experiences from any previously managed incidents of conflict.

8.5 SUMMARY

This research is concerned with the key account managers' internal selling role and the internal conflict characteristics as perceived, experienced and discussed by the participating key account managers, the behaviours they adopted, the outcomes they perceived and the effects on subsequent conflict episodes.

This research has shown that the key account managers have a complex internal selling role which leads them to have to manage a number of conflict situations across a wide range of relationships, thus validating previous research suggesting the importance and complexity of the internal selling role (Leifer and Delbecq, 1978; Hakansson and Wootz, 1979; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005; Plouffe and Barclay, 2007))

This research shows how the key account managers perceived conflict by source, describing a situational dimension and a departmental dimension to the perceived nature of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. These perceived sources extend the previous research of Jehn (1995) and Jameson, (1999) adding the key account managers' perspective. The findings also validate the theory of conflict composition (Jehn and Chatman, 2000) showing that from the key account managers' perspective an incident of conflict can have multiple sources and that their perceived sources contain elements of task and relationship conflict types (Jehn, 1995). This research also validates the previous research which suggests that conflict can also have a positive influence (De Drue, 1997) showing that for the key account managers the conflicts experienced can stimulate completive behaviour and provide a learning experience. However, the key account managers also experienced negative consequences consistent with the traditional largely negative views of conflict with the consequence of de-motivation being an extending previous research providing a key account managers perspective.

This research challenges the previous research into conflict management behaviour showing that for the key account managers involved collaboration was not always the behavioural choice nor did it always result in the best possible outcome, challenging the 'one best way' perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). Moreover, this research also shows that the key account managers were able to adopt multiple behaviours

based on their perception of the conflict characteristics and the perceived outcome. Thus, this research also challenges the contingency and complexity perspectives on conflict management (Thomas, 1992; Van de Vliert, 1997) proposing a sequential contingency perspective where there are more combined behavioural choices than collaboration and competition.

Finally, this research supports Pondy's (1989) alternative view point and adds new theoretical insights into conflict and its management showing that from the key account managers' perspective conflict is an inherent condition of their organisational life. This research shows that the key account manager can experience more than one conflict at any one time, that they experienced multiple, simultaneous incidents of conflict of varying duration and intensity each with a unique set of characteristics.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusion and implications of this research, detailing the contributions the theory, method and practice together with the research limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to explore the key account managers' internal selling role, specifically how intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts were perceived and managed by the key account managers involved. 112 conflict incidents were identified from 1,120 minutes of audio data based on critical incident interviews with 29 key account managers. This chapter presents the conclusions of the thesis, summarising the key account managers' perception of conflict within the organisation and how this conflict is managed. In this chapter a summary of the key findings are presented together with details of the research contributions to theory, method and practice. The chapter also presents the limitations of the research, together with suggestions for future research into conflict and the intra-organisational dimension of the key account management selling role.

9.2 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The findings have shown that the participating key account managers did have an extensive and time-consuming internal selling role to perform which was perceived to be vital in meeting their customers' demands and ultimately achieving their sales objectives. Moreover, this research has shown that the perceived sources of internal conflict from a key account management perspective have a situational and departmental dimension, that the conflicts can have a unique composition having more than one perceived source and that the consequences of the conflicts encountered can be positive or negative. The findings have shown that the key account managers were able to adapt and use a wide range of behaviours in the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict and that from their perspective, conflict was ever present within the organisation with multiple conflicts frequently occurring at the same time. The findings were presented following the

thematic approach as outlined in the methodology; the conclusions will be presented using the same framework.

9.2.1 The Key Account Manager's Internal Selling Role

This research has shown that the participating key account managers had complex internal relationships across nine different departments and had to manage a range of disputes in seven different situations. Moreover, this research found that the key account managers, when acting as the organisational boundary spanner, had a variable degree of interdependence with a wide range of functions both inside and outside of the organisation. This resulted in the participating key account managers frequently having had to handle conflict within the organisation, showing that managing this conflict is a major component of their internal selling role. Furthermore, the customer was described as the main reason for these incidents of conflict where the conflict occurred as a direct result of the key account managers representing their customers' needs internally. This validates the previous research which has suggested the extensive internal selling role of the key account manager (Leifer and Delbecq, 1978; Hakansson and Wootz, 1979; Vaaland and Hakansson, 2003; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005) and also validates the previously suggested idea that the key account manager needs to manage conflict effectively within the organisation, while acting as the customer advocate, in order to maintain this perception externally and ultimately meet the customers' requirements (Kothandaraman and Wilson, 2000).

9.2.2 The Nature of Intra-organisational, Interpersonal Conflict: A Key Account Manager's Perspective

For the key account managers involved in this research, their perception of the nature of conflict within the organisation was complex, having a departmental and situational dimension to the perceived source; i.e., where the conflict came from and why. The key account managers identified seven situational sources of conflict: communication, resources, people, roles, goals, self interest and culture. They also identified nine departmental sources: marketing, finance, senior management, production, new product development, other key account managers, customer services, supply chain

and human resources. The findings have shown that these perceived sources are complex and interrelated, with any one incident having more than one departmental or situational source. This extends the previous research (Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Jehn and Chatman, 2000) by adding the key account managers' perceived sources of conflict to the established conflict taxonomies. This research has shown how the key account managers characterised conflict by source rather than the viewpoints, actions and goals of those involved. However, the analysis of the sources supports the suggested taxonomy of Jehn and Chatman (2000) in that each source, departmental and situational, was shown to have the elements of task, relationship and process conflict. Moreover, this research also validates Jehn and Chatman's concept of conflict composition where the research has shown that each conflict episode has a unique composition being made up of multiple perceived situational and department sources.

The key account managers also had a perception of the consequences of intra-organisation, interpersonal conflicts as something they viewed both positively and negatively. They described how being both challenged and stimulated by the conflict allowed them to learn from the experience. The key account managers described conflict as something which had to be handled and a phenomenon which came as part of their role, keeping them alert and focused on the customer need. In these two respects conflict was viewed positively. However, prolonged exposure to perceived unnecessary conflict led to increased frustration, competitive behaviour and ultimately de-motivation, these being the perceived negative consequences. Thus, this research validates the more recent research which suggests conflict with certain characteristics in certain situations can have a positive effect on relationships and is not always viewed as being a wholly negative (De Drue, 1997, Janssen *et al.*, 1999)

9.2.3 Conflict Management Behaviours: A Key Account Manager's Perspective

The aim of the second theme under investigation was to determine which behaviours or combination of behaviours were most effective for the key account manager in managing instances of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. The behaviours examined in this research were those established by Thomas (1976) which is widely

used throughout previous research adopting the dual concern theory perspective. The behaviours were: accommodating, competing, compromising, avoiding and collaborating. The findings have shown that for the participating key account managers there was a strong tendency initially to use collaborative behaviour, whatever the situation. Collaboration was very much the first step aimed at the perceived 'win / win' recommended by the 'one best way' (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). However, where collaboration did not achieve the desired result, the key account manager adopted a more forceful and assertive position, in order to take control of the situation, in many incidents using a combination of collaborative and competitive behaviours to achieve the desired result. The findings show that the collaborative behavioural choice had a perceived positive outcome in two thirds of the incidents where it was described. However, the behavioural style tended to shift when dealing with conflicts with other key account managers or senior management regarding role, goal or people as perceived situational sources of conflict. Under these circumstances, the key account manager chose avoidance or accommodating behaviours which resulted in an undesired outcome in almost all cases. The key account managers involved were able to adapt their behaviour according to the perceived sources of the conflicts experienced and also change their behaviour throughout and across conflict episodes, in most cases while attempting to achieve what they believed to be the best possible outcome. Thus these results challenge the one best way perspective of Sternberg and Soriano (1984) showing that collaboration was not always the best behavioural choice for the key account managers and where an alternative behavioural choice was made or changed during the described interaction there could be a perceived positive outcome. Thus, this research extends the complexity perspective of conflict management theory (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999) showing that the key account managers were able to change their conflict management behaviour based on their perceptions of the conflict characteristics and potential outcome.

9.2.4 The Key Account Managers' Perception of the Abundance of Intra-organisational, Interpersonal Conflict

When describing conflict within their own organisations, the key account managers interviewed discussed the frequency of any conflicts encountered. For 27 of the 29 key account managers interviewed, incidents of conflict occurred frequently and not in isolation. Twenty-four saw conflict as a permanent feature of organisational life, something they were always dealing with, while only one of the key account managers interviewed had difficulty with this theme of the investigation but did, however, manage to describe in detail three specific incidents of very complex conflicts in some detail. In this research the findings have shown conflict to be an inherent condition of organisational life from a key account management perspective, something the key account managers constantly had to deal with, reflecting Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint. Most importantly, this research has shown that, for the participating key account managers, multiple conflicts frequently occur at the same time and that the duration and intensity of any of these conflicts experienced can vary.

In summary, the key account managers involved in this research used a number of different approaches in the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict; the process is complex where each incident was so unique that, although there was some learning, it did not always follow that the learning could be applied to subsequent incidents. The findings have shown that collaboration worked best most of the time and was the preferred behavioural choice in every incident described which is consistent with the 'one best way' perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). However, this perspective is challenged in that collaboration is not always the behavioural choice and does not always result in the best possible outcome.

9.3 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Easterby-Smith, Antonacopoulou, Simm and Lyles (2004) specify that a contribution can be made through four strategies of conceptual development: firstly, connecting to an ongoing debate in the field of the research; secondly, by amalgamating streams of work and ideas within the same field which previously have been separate; thirdly,

introducing concepts from another field outside of the main area of research; and fourthly, from ‘blue sky’ thinking.

| Area of Contribution | Research Objectives | Type of Contribution |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Contributions to Theory | Extending understanding of the key account managers’ internal selling role and the wide range of complex relationships which are managed, specifically the occurrence of conflict related to representing their customers’ needs within the organisation. | Extending knowledge of the key account managers’ internal selling role |
| | Establishing an understanding of the key account management perspective on the characteristics of conflict within the organisation and the impact this knowledge had on the internal selling role. | New Theoretical Insight & Validation of Conflict Typology |
| | Establishing an understanding of the key account management perspective on managing conflict within the organisation and the complex sequences of behaviours used. | New Theoretical Insight & Extending the Complexity Perspective |
| | Establishing that conflict episodes within the organisation do not always occur in isolation, that the key account managers experienced and managed multiple incidents of conflict at the same time. | New Theoretical Insight |
| | Establishing that conflict episodes were a constant and inherent feature of the key account managers’ organisational life as opposed to a series of discrete isolated incidents, supporting Pondy’s (1989, 1992) alternative viewpoint. | New Theoretical Insight |
| Contributions to Method | Methodologically, to extend the critical incident technique into the study of conflict management and the internal dimension of the key account managers’ internal selling role taking an interpretivist, grounded approach. | Extending |
| | Applying the interpretive framework for coding to the data transcripts, combining both a computer assisted coding method using NVivo 8.0 and manual coding methods, allowing theory to emerge from the data. | Extending |

Table 9.1 Summary of the Contributions to Theory and Method

This research contains findings which validate, extend and challenge previous research into organisational conflict and how it is managed. The findings also add new theoretical insights into the key account management’s internal selling role specifically, considering how conflict is perceived and managed from a key account

management perspective. In doing so this research makes a contribution through all four of the Easterby-Smith *et al's.*, (2004) strategies; the contributions to theory and method are summarised in table 9.1 and discussed further in the following sections.

9.3.1 Contributions to Theory

Firstly, this research adds new empirical data and further conceptualisation to an area where there has been only slight research through developing and expanding the existing debate centred on the key account management's internal selling role. This research takes the notion of salesperson behaviours, in particular adaptive selling skills, and applies these behaviours to the internal selling role – specifically, to the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts which arise as a direct result of the key account managers carrying out their internal sales duties. In this thesis, certain aspects of the key account manager's internal selling role have been validated; i.e., that key account managers do have a complex internal role, acting in a boundary spanning capacity, having to manage a wide range of internal relationships in order to meet their sales objectives (Leifer and Delbecq, 1978; Hakansson and Wootz, 1979; Vaaland and Hakansson, 2003; Battencourt *et al.*, 2005). This research also shows that conflict occurs within the organisation where the key account managers' perceived barriers to achieving their objectives and it shows that the key account managers' perceived conflict in a complex way characterising that conflict by where it came from and why extending previous conflict taxonomies (Janssen *et al.*, 1997; Jehn and Chatman, 2000) and validating conflict composition (Jehn and Chatman, 2000).

Secondly, by combining ideas from conflict and key account management theory. this research has tackled the issue of conflict typology (Deutsch, 1973; Jehn, 1995) in order to differentiate conflicts from a key account management perspective. This study adds to this theoretical perspective by suggesting conflicts have a unique composition being made up of the different types of conflict as proposed by Jehn and Chatman, (2000). This research extends the previous research in that, from the key account managers' perspective, conflict was characterised by source, having a situational and departmental dimension; i.e., where the conflict came from and why.

Moreover, this research also shows that the key account managers perceived each incident of conflict described as having multiple sources; i.e., a departmental and frequently more than one situational source. Thus, this research extends the current theory showing conflict composition from a key account management perspective. Moreover, this research extends the previous research by Jehn (1995) where the situational and departmental dimensions described by the key account managers were shown to have elements of the conflict taxonomies previously researched; i.e., a task, relationship and process element. Although the literature review argued for a uniform conflict taxonomy, this research suggests that the way in which the key account managers perceived the nature of conflict within the organisation is consistent with the current typology; their view was dimensional and related to source rather than an objective or subjective viewpoint relating to tasks, viewpoints and the people involved. Furthermore, this research adds to the growing research which suggests conflict can have both positive and negative influences on those involved (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). In fact, the key account managers had both a positive and negative perception of the conflicts they described. All of the participating key account managers first described the positive effects of having to deal with conflict within the organisation, of how it made them feel challenged and created opportunities to meet the customers' needs in new ways. The key account managers also expressed their negative perception of conflict, in that where it was perceived to be prolonged and unnecessary it led to frustration and ultimately de-motivation.

Thirdly, the review of the literature has shown that, despite the call by Van de Vliert *et al.*, (1999), there has been little empirical research to date which applies a complexity perspective to the management conflict, accepting that conflict incidents do not occur in isolation and that a varied set of behaviours may be required to handle each specific incident. This research encapsulates this debate and applies it to the key account managers' internal selling role. It also makes a contribution in that it combines both the personal selling and conflict management concepts in the intra-organisational context. Moreover, it addresses the paradox of the 'one best way perspective' (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984) versus the complexity perspective (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997) by exploring the behaviours sales people use across multiple, simultaneous conflict episodes through an analysis of every incident described and the

combination of behaviours used. The conglomerated complexity perspective, which suggests managers may adopt a combination of Thomas' (1976) behaviours in many respects although moving on from the 'one best way' perspective, has become a 'conglomerated one best way perspective' in that it advocates the use of competing and collaborative behaviours in order to achieve the best possible outcome. This research extends the conglomerated perspective by presenting eight other behavioural combinations showing that key account managers' behavioural choice is related to their perception of the conflict characteristics in addition to the perceived outcome. Moreover, this research has shown that although collaboration and competing were the preferred behavioural choices they did not always result in the best possible outcome. By adapting their behaviours in other ways, the key account managers were able to pursue what they believed to be the best possible outcome. Thus this research extends the conglomerated complexity perspective (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999) suggesting a fourth complexity approach, a sequential contingency perspective where the selected conflict management behaviours are based upon the key account managers' interpretation of the conflict characteristics; i.e., the micro environment in which the incidents are handled and the perceived outcome.

Finally, this research addresses the issues raised by Pondy (1989; 1992) in that, based on an initial conceptual visualisation, it takes up the mantle and investigates conflict as a permanent feature of organisational life, where multiple conflicts can occur simultaneously, each with a different and unique set of characteristics, as opposed to treating conflicts as discrete isolated incidents which occur in an otherwise cooperative organisation. This research empirically establishes the theory of multiple, simultaneous conflict episodes from the key account managers' perspective showing that conflict is a constant feature of the key account managers' organisational life. Thus it adds new theoretical insights to the knowledge of conflict and conflict management strategy by showing that the key account manager adopts multiple conflict management behaviours in order to manage the frequently occurring, multiple and complex conflict episodes.

In summary, this thesis makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge offering new theoretical insights in the fields of key account management and conflict

management adding further conceptualisation and new empirical data to an area where there has been little research. This research contributes to our understanding of key account managers' behaviour, their perception of conflict within the organisation and how it is managed. Moreover, with the majority of sales research taking place in North America where it has a wider academic audience, this research makes a contribution both to the fields of personal selling and organisational conflict by adding a European perspective. Furthermore, by focusing on the internal relationships and the behaviours key account managers use to manage internal interpersonal conflicts, this research adds new insight to the understanding of the key account managers' internal selling role. This research has shown that the participating key account managers frequently had to handle several different conflicts at any one time, that conflicts did not occur as discrete isolated incidents, and that the behavioural choices in their management were more complex than the current complexity perspective suggests. This research validates Pondy's (1989) reflections on his own work and the later work of Van de Vliert *et al.*, (1995) which show conflict to be an inherent condition of organisational life. From the key account management perspective conflict is something the key account managers continually have had to deal with.

9.3.2 Contributions to Method

This research extends the use of the critical incident technique within marketing to a study of the effectiveness of conflict management behaviours within the organisation from a key account management perspective. In taking an interpretive approach, the researcher was able to analyse the key account managers' accounts of actual conflict incidents and how they were managed, as opposed to using the CIT for theory testing. This inductive approach allowed for theory to flow from the data and the research themes to be fully investigated. This approach, although well established in marketing (Gremier, 2003; Grace, 2007; Chung-Herrera *et al.*, 2004), has not previously been used to investigate key account management behaviours in the context of the internal selling role and in this respect widens the use of both the critical incident and the interpretive framework for coding. Through the application of the interpretive framework for coding, this thesis also extends this interpretive research methodology

into an area dominated by positivist, survey research methods, thus allowing theory to emerge from the key account managers' real life accounts of conflict within the organisation.

9.3.3 Contributions to Practice

This research also provides a valuable contribution to practice drawing attention to the intra-organisational dimension of the key account managers' selling role and how conflict is managed. It shows that key account managers have to handle a wide range of relationships within their organisations in order to meet their customers' needs and that they perceive constant barriers across these relationships to achieving those needs. This research demonstrates that an understanding of internal conflicts and how these conflicts are managed is an essential selling skill of the key account manager and also highlights some of the potential negative consequences of conflict within the organisation which could result in frustration, increased competitive behaviour and de-motivation. This research has shown that the key account managers involved were able to adapt based on their perception of the required outcome and the characteristics of the conflict situation they were in. Thus, in practice it is vital that the key account manager is fully equipped with the necessary skills to fully carry out their internal selling duties which include the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict. This research has also shown that key account managers perceived departmental sources of conflict together with the perceived situational sources. One of the key situational sources was related to miscommunication within the organisational across many departments. Thus one practical application could be an increased focus on the internal communication of customer strategy ensuring a clear and consistent message is delivered throughout the organisation.

This research presents a view of conflict within the organisation from a key account management perspective which shows conflict as an inherent condition of the key account managers' role within the organisation together with the proposal that conflicts do not occur in isolation. This thesis goes on to present a sequential contingency perspective on conflict management which moves beyond Thomas' (1976) dual concern theory model. Thus, in practice this research could be extended

to provide a set of conflict characteristics which in practice the key account manager could use in order to adopt the most appropriate set of behaviours to achieve the best possible outcome. A summary of the contributions to practice is presented in table 9.2.

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Contributions to Practice | Providing a revised conflict taxonomy from a key account management perspective based on the perceived sources of conflict within the organisation. | Extending current practice to include the key account managers' perspective |
| | Providing a framework for the management of intra-organisational conflict which moves beyond two dimensions, demonstrating how a combination of behaviours based on the conflict circumstances and characteristics can achieve the best possible outcome. | Challenging the existing two dimensional model proposing a complexity approach |

Table 9.2 Summary of the Contributions to Practice

In summary this research makes a significant contribution to practice in the field of personal selling and conflict management theory by adding new theoretical insights into the key account managers' internal selling role and how conflict is perceived and managed. This research also provides a contribution to practice through the characterisation of conflict from the key account managers' perspective and how this conflict can be best managed.

9.4 LIMITATIONS

9.4.1 Methodological Limitations

Using the critical incident technique as established by Flanagan (1954), with an interpretive framework for coding, enabled the researcher to address the issues of robustness and validity (Butterfield *et al.*, 2005) by following strict research protocols through both the data collection and analysis. In order to address the issues of reliability and validity, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and the files used for interpretation throughout the data analysis. To maintain a rigorous approach, a detailed description of the data analysis procedure was set out using an interpretive framework for coding initially using NVivo 8.0 and the research was kept

strictly in line with Flanagan's (1954) method of data enquiry. Moreover, the central methodological issues stemmed from the processes required to intelligently and meaningfully reduce text to a relatively smaller number of categories. Issues of validity therefore arose in reference to the classification of data and its interpretation, notably the validity of categories identified. With open coding the research process begins without any model from existing theory and therefore a wide variety of conceptual labels for the data could be created. Therefore the creation and testing of the coding scheme is a process that demands iteration and successive refinement as theory evolves, with the subcategories continually being tested for stability and robustness. In this research the findings were presented as the key account managers involved discussed them with the emergent categories reflecting this perception. In doing so the perceived sources of conflict, composition of the conflicts, consequences of conflicts and the view of conflict as an inherent condition of the intra-organisational interactions emerged. These emergent categories were then discussed in relation to the literature, establishing the research firmly in the key account management context.

9.4.2 Researcher Bias

Another potential limitation of this research which is related to the interpretation of the data is that of researcher bias where the open coding allows for great flexibility and therefore potential error. Without rigorous standards the coding process could be reduced to an unsystematic thematic analysis and have little value (Webber, 1990). Therefore, in order to address this issue rigorous standards were applied and repeated throughout the data interpretation, and the emerging categories and coding processes were peer reviewed for consistency, reliability and robustness – this being the refutation stage of Spiggle's (1994) framework. In this research, regular peer review meetings took place to discuss the emerging categories and their relationships. This process ensured the emerging categories remained true to the key account managers' perception and not the researcher's and that the coding process remained consistent across the data.

Another potential limitation relating to researcher bias is the knowledge and experience of key account management processes that the researcher has. Having 16 years of experience as a key account manager and salesperson, there is a possibility of the researcher influencing the sample as a result of his prolonged engagement. In order to address this potential bias, tentative findings and speculations were regularly checked with peers and colleagues while the researcher engaged in self-reflection to identify any potential sources of bias or predispositions towards or against the area of research. In mitigation, it was the researcher's experience of the key account management process which initially suggested conflict as an important topic for study, and the researcher's prior experience facilitated access to the participating companies because it gave him credibility in a key account management context.

9.4.3 KAM Perceptions

Another limitation of this research, and the CIT method, is that it is based solely on the perceptions of the key account managers involved and does not take into account the perceptions of any other parties involved in the conflicts described. However, the aim of this research was not to study the dyadic relationship between both parties involved nor to measure the accuracy of the incidents described; the purpose was to explore the key account managers' perception of conflict within the organisation and how it is managed. To this end the CIT proved to be the most appropriate methodology and in this research successfully elicited accounts of 112 incidents.

This research is retrospective in its design and relies on accurate recollection of incidents by the participants; i.e., that the participants are indeed describing actual events. To some extent, this is a predictable issue with the use of CIT, particularly where the intention is to examine the outcome of each incident, because inevitably this must take place *ex post facto*. This potential limitation was minimised through the strict definition of what constitutes a critical incident of conflict and each of the participants was fully briefed on the data collection method before the interview process. In this respect, each incident described by each of the participants met the criteria for a critical incident. However, there were some issues with retrospective recall; for the key account managers, actually specifying what constituted a critical

incident initially proved difficult and they had to work hard to remember specific details. This was addressed through the structure of the interview; after the key account managers' described their perception of the nature of conflict within the organisation they were more comfortable with the concept of conflict and able to answer the CIT interview questions that followed.

9.4.4 Generalisability

One of the main limitations of this study is how generalisable the findings are to the wider key account management community. In this research generalisability was not the aim of the study; the main purpose was to answer the research question; i.e., how do key account managers perceive and manage interpersonal conflicts within their organisation? In answering this question, this research followed a thematic approach and sought to gain the key account managers' perspective on what constitutes intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict, how this conflict is managed, which behaviours provide the best possible outcomes under what circumstances and how often incidents of conflict are experienced.

The issue of generalisability was addressed through the sample selection protocols where key account managers were selected from seven different organisations, with different product propositions and key account managers responsibility. However, each of the organisations had to have had an established key account management team at the time of the research fitting the established definition of key account management (McDonald *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, in order to address the issue of international generalisability both U.S. and U.K. organisations made up samples for the research where all of the organisations involved were suppliers of product, the major retail customers offering products which fitted the description of being fast moving consumer goods. In this respect the key account managers across the organisations had similar sales responsibilities both within their organisation and externally with their customers. The key account managers in this research each had responsibility for products distributed within their own domestic marketplace although the products they sold were internationally recognised. The organisations they worked for were international organisations with similar key account structures

in other countries; i.e., teams of key account managers in other countries with similar duties dealing with important strategic customers in their respective markets. In this respect the sample used in this research is representative of organisations having a key account management structure fitting McDonald *et al.*'s (2000) definition with a customer base of major retailers as opposed to manufacturer to manufacturer.

Although this research has certain limitations which have been addressed, it is these limitations which help in setting out an agenda for future research where certain aspects of the limitations can be further addressed and the new theoretic insights gained from this interpretive research tested.

9.5 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future KAM research needs to further explore the key account managers' internal selling role, investigating the factors which may influence the key account managers' behaviour within their organisations. The sample demographic characteristics show the wide range of different responsibilities each of the key account managers had together with their time served within their organisations. One possible stream of future research would be to explore each of the factors shown in the demographics: the role branded products play versus retailer own label brands, the role key account manager location plays (field or office based), the influence of experience and how many customers the key account manager has responsibility for. Research into these aspects of the key account managers' position within the organisation could be approached taking a quantitative survey method testing the influence these factors have upon key account managers' behaviours within the organisation utilising a potentially much larger data base.

This research has shown that the key account managers involved had an extensive internal selling role, but covers only one aspect, that of conflict. Therefore the opportunity exists to extend research beyond conflict and study more aspects of the internal dimension of the key account managers' internal selling role expanding on Plouffe and Barclay's (2007) work; i.e., exploring how the key account manager navigates through the organisation.

This research also proposes the sequential contingency model described in chapter 8 (figure 8.2); this model shows the relationship between the perceived nature of the conflict experienced and the adopted conflict management strategy from a key account management perspective. The model also shows how the perceived outcome of any one incident of conflict could influence the way in which subsequent conflicts are perceived; i.e., the outcome of one conflict may change the characteristics of future conflicts and therefore any future conflict management strategy. Thus, the model is cyclical, allowing for the representation of the continuous management of multiple, simultaneous conflicts. What this research does not show is the potential for the skills and knowledge of the key account manager to influence neither their behavioural strategy nor those of the other parties experiencing the conflict. Thus the exploratory nature of this research sets out a theoretical model which could be tested in future research using larger samples and a quantitative approach, testing hypothesis related to the skills and knowledge of the key account managers. The testing of this model could therefore lead to practitioner operationalisation of the model moving the theory of conflict management beyond the two dimensional dual concern theory model (Thomas, 1976).

Finally, having established empirically from a key account management perspective that conflict is perceived to be an inherent component of organisational life and the conflict episodes do not occur in isolation, management scholars would further benefit from comparative studies of other groups within the organisation perhaps taking a dyadic approach to add further empirical data following Pondy's (1989) alternative viewpoint. A case study method or action research would be best suited to the observation of the relationships concerned in order to understand the perceptions of all parties involved.

POSTSCRIPT – PERSONAL REFLECTION

Throughout this research I have maintained an enthusiastic interest in key account management and personal selling being directly involved with the Cranfield, Key Account Management Best Practice club and the Strategic Sales executive education programmes. It was only through these relationships established at Cranfield and a combination of sheer determination and the leveraging of old relationships that this research started to take form. It became clear right from the start that personal selling is a much more complex phenomenon than the management of a relationship with a customer in order to make the sale. After sixteen years' experience as a salesperson at every level, from the transactional to the established relationship manager in complex key account management, the move to understanding personal selling from an academic perspective did not come easily. Many ideas continually flowed from many sources until finally after scoping what seemed to be an extremely wide body of literature the concept of the key account managers' internal selling role became evident. From this point on it was the combination of two bodies of literature which dominated the understanding of this complex role, bringing both psychology literature and management literature together. In doing so, the alternative viewpoint of conflict became evident and together with the unique positioning of the key account manager within the organisation the research objectives became clear. The remainder of the journey is presented in this thesis, the culmination of four years work and the most intense, meaningful and thoroughly enjoyable learning experience of my life, something which will become the foundation for future research and continued engagement in the sales academic community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A-1

Critical Incident Technique Interview Protocols



Conflict and the Key Account Managers Internal Selling Role

Critical Incident Technique Protocols and Pre-Interview Preparation

The Critical Incident Technique (or CIT) is a set of procedures used for collecting direct observations of human behaviour that have critical significance and meet methodically defined criteria.

A critical incident report should describe a situation, and an action that was important, significant or critical in determining whether the outcome was effective or ineffective. Flanagan (1954) emphasises that the critical incident technique should be thought of as a flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation a hand. Following Flanagan's (1954) directions precisely, proposals must include a clear, concise statement of the purpose or aim of the study; specifications for the types of data to be collected; plans for selection of the population to be used; guidelines for observing, interpreting and classifying critical incidents; plans for analysing data and for interpreting and reporting results.

The critical incidents technique can be defined as a set of procedures for systematically identifying behaviours that contribute to the success or failure of individuals or organisations in specific situations.

The following criteria need to be met for a successful CIT analysis:

- I. Data are centred on real critical incidents that occur during a task performance.
- II. Tasks are performed by real users, practitioners.
- III. Users, practitioners, are located in their normal working environment.
- IV. Data are captured in normal task situations, not laboratory settings.
- V. Users, practitioners, self report their own critical incidents retrospectively, after they have happened.
- VI. There is no direct interaction between user, practitioner and researcher during the description of the incident(s).

Flanagan identified five steps involved in CIT:

1. Identify the system of interest, the set of individuals which are of interest in this research.
2. Formulate the general aims of the system of interest (ie a brief statement of the topic under study) to plan and specify how factual incidents regarding the general aim of the study will be collected.
3. Plan the survey or data collection method.
4. Collect the data.
5. Analyse the data.

For the purpose of this research, steps 1 to 4 are detailed below in preparation for adapted open, semi-structured interviews with practising key account managers in the field.

1. Identify the System of Interest

For the purpose of this research the *system* of interest will be the key account management sales team – a team of individual key account managers, each of whom could be considered to be a *subsystem*, which operates and functions as part of their organisation, the *suprasystem*, in performing their sales duties.

2. General Aims of the System of Interest

The next step is to identify the aims of the system of interest. Flanagan (1954) states that without a statement of the general aims of the system of interest no planning and evaluation of behaviours is possible. He also says that the statement should be as broad and simple as possible.

Taking Napolitano's (1997) definition, business relationships within key, strategically important accounts are typically managed by a key account manager, the sales manager, who is responsible for speaking to large, complex, important customers in one voice which represents the full capabilities of the supplier.

Put simply, the aim of key account managers is to maximise the sales potential within their customer base while maintaining and developing meaningful relationships with all parties involved.

Specifically for this research, one aim of key account managers is to effectively communicate the needs of the customer internally, within their organisation, as part of the internal sales process and manage any resulting disputes or conflict episodes

3. Plan the Data Collection Method

For the purpose of this research, the unit of analysis will be a critical incident as described by the key account manager. The critical incident will be a conflict episode, dispute, undesirable situation, misunderstanding or disagreement, as perceived by the key account managers, arising as a direct result of their internal sales duties in carrying out the internal selling role and subsequent internal representation of the customers needs, one identified aim of key account management.

The target participants for the initial study will be individual key account managers who manage accounts which fit the definition of a key account with the research participants being from the same organisation. Through an open and semi-structured interview process, each participant will be asked to recollect critical incidents or conflict episodes arising from their internal selling role and customer representation.

In order to fit with the critical incident technique, each respondent will be asked to recollect, in their own words, two types of incident, those which were effectively resolved or mitigated, and those which were ineffectively resolved or agitated; i.e., an outcome which the respondent found unsatisfactory. The participants will be informed on what to report on and how this fits with the general aim. Through open questions each participant will be asked to recollect the skills and behaviours adopted in the management of these critical incidents or conflict episodes and their perceptions of the outcome. The interviews will be recorded and the voice files transcribed.

Having completed the initial interview, the participants will be asked if they will follow up in one week with any new incidents which may have taken place; this interview will be conducted over the telephone one week after the first interview in order to gain a larger sample size of incidents.

Flanagan (1954) also states that one of the strengths of the CIT is its flexibility. In this study, the opening of the interview will follow a semi-structured method allowing the participants to describe their perceptions of the nature of any conflict incidents encountered when carrying out their internal selling duties, prior to describing specific critical incidents. This will allow the respondents to get into a specific mindset and provide clarity for the CIT part of the interview. After describing the specific incidents the interview will close with the participants describing the frequency of conflict episodes encountered. In taking this approach three key areas are considered with respect to conflict and the key account manager's internal selling role. These are:

1. An investigation into the key account manager's understanding of conflict within the organisation.
2. Investigating the key account manager's perception of which behaviours are most effective in the resolution of conflict episodes or critical incidents.
3. An understanding of the abundance and frequency of occurrence of the conflict episodes encountered by key account managers within their organisations.

Data Collection

Interview Questions – *The story of conflict and the 'inside selling job'*

Interview to take place on completion of the respondent profile, interviews to last approximately 40-45 minutes.

Introduction – the nature of conflict and customer orientation

Q1. Thinking about your internal role as a key account manager, that is the duties you perform within your organisation in order to meet customer demands and meet your

sales objectives, can you briefly describe what you believe to be undesirable situations, misunderstandings, conflicts, disputes or disagreements which present a barrier to your achieving your goals?

Q2. What was it like being in these situations? How does it make you feel?

Q3. What do you think causes these situations?

Q4. Can you identify any specific characteristics of these situations? Are some different from others?

Probes will be used for elaboration:

‘Could you elaborate on this...?’

‘Could you be more specific...?’

‘Was this expected...?’

‘Could you tell me more about...?’

Together with listening skills:

Waiting and listening

Non-committal responses, nodding, smiling

Turning last statements into questions for clarification

The Critical Incident Technique – Instructions for Participants

EFFECTIVE DISPUTE / CONFLICT RESOLUTION X 2 (or more)

From your experience, think of the most recent situation in which you experienced a conflict episode which occurred when carrying out your duties within your organisation. Think of the most recent situation that impressed you as an outstanding example of how this type of conflict episode can be managed effectively.

Q1. What was the situation? (Briefly describe the background to, and all relevant aspects of, the incident).

Q2. Exactly what did you do; what BEHAVIOURS did you adopt in order to manage the conflict episode? (This refers to your behaviours not the behaviours of others or processes).

Q3. Why do you feel this / these behaviour(s) (actions) was / were particularly effective?

Q4. Can you now in your own words describe what you feel the consequences or outcomes of these disagreements were?

Q5. What was it like being in that situation?

Q6. How do you feel about that particular situation now? What, if anything, would you have done differently?

Again the only researcher involvement will be probes used for elaboration and to distinguish separate incidents for clarity during analysis.

Probes will be used for elaboration:

- 'Could you elaborate on this...?'
- 'Could you be more specific...?'
- 'Was this expected...?'
- 'Could you tell me more about...?'

Together with listening skills:

- Waiting and listening
- Non-committal responses, nodding, smiling
- Turning last statements into questions for clarification

INEFFECTIVE DISPUTE / CONFLICT RESOLUTION X 2 (or more)

From your experience, think of the most recent situation in which you experienced a conflict episode which occurred when carrying out your duties within your organisation. Think of the most recent situation that impressed you as an outstanding example of how this type of conflict episode can be managed ineffectively.

Q1. What was the situation? (Briefly describe the background to, and all relevant aspects of, the incident).

Q2. Exactly what did you do; what BEHAVIOURS did you adopt in order to attempt to manage the conflict episode? (This refers to your behaviours not the behaviours of others or processes).

Q3. Why do you feel this / these behaviour(s) (actions) was / were particularly ineffective?

Q4. Can you now in your own words describe what you feel the consequences or outcomes of these disagreements were?

Q5. What was it like being in that situation?

Q6. . How do you feel about that particular situation now? What if anything would you have done differently?

Again the only researcher involvement will be probes used for elaboration and to distinguish separate incidents for clarity during analysis.

Probes will be used for elaboration:

- 'Could you elaborate on this...?'
- 'Could you be more specific...?'
- 'Was this expected...?'
- 'Could you tell me more about...?'

Together with listening skills:

- Waiting and listening
- Non-committal responses, nodding, smiling
- Turning last statements into questions for clarification

Close – Abundance and Frequency of Conflict Episodes or Disputes

Q1. How frequently do you encounter conflict episodes, disputes, undesirable situations, misunderstandings or disagreements when carrying out your duties within your organisation?

Q2. How many of these types of conflict episode have you had to handle at any one time?

Q3. What is conflict – something you are constantly dealing with or an occasional incident?

Appendix A-2

Instructions for Participants



Conflict and the Key account manager's Internal Selling Role

Instructions for Participants

Overview

During this interview I will be asking you to describe specific examples of BEHAVIOURS which you have demonstrated when handling conflict within the organisation. I will be looking for you to identify behaviours which you feel to be good examples of either effective or ineffective management of any conflict episodes which you have encountered. Each of these conflict episodes which you have experienced will be referred to as critical incidents and should be a factual description of an event which meets the following criteria:

- Events which you experienced or were involved with directly.
- An incident which in your view clearly demonstrates behaviours which were particularly effective or ineffective regarding conflict resolution.
- Had a clear-cut consequence that was observable; i.e., the conflict being resolved to your satisfaction or an outcome which was undesirable.

It is important to note that it is a particular set of behaviours and NOT processes or individuals and their attitudes that you are describing when you are reporting on these incidents. This distinction is crucial. The focus must be on an EVENT which occurred and NOT on an individual judged to be particularly effective or ineffective.

Limit your descriptions to those events which you feel were of critical importance to you at the time with regard to your achieving your goals. Your critical incidents need not be highly dramatic; however, they should focus on situations and events which occur frequently in your everyday working life. Also, since everyday life is sometimes complex, it would not be unusual to find examples of both effective and ineffective behaviour reported for the same type of incident.

An example might be an internal conflict with a brand manager over a product launch or a dispute with finance over a customer's terms.

Sufficient time will be allowed in the interview for you to recollect critical incidents representing effective behaviour and critical incidents representing ineffective behaviour. It is these incidents which make up the study not the number of interviews

and it is important to consider as many as possible in the allotted time. Ideally I am looking for two examples of each.

Interview procedure

1. In the first part of the interview I will be asking general questions regarding your views of conflict within the organisation. The conflict you experience when carrying out the internal selling role, different types of conflict you may experience, conflict related to people and their attitudes or emotions, conflict related to the daily tasks you carry out or perhaps conflict related to the market position, culture and structure of your organisation. This will set the scene.
2. Secondly I will move on to the part of the interview which constitutes the Critical Incident Technique or CIT as outlined above.

The critical incidents technique can be defined as a set of procedures for systematically identifying behaviours that contribute to success or failure of individuals' or organisations' performance in specific situations.

The critical incident will be a conflict episode, dispute, undesirable situation, misunderstanding or disagreement, as perceived by you, the key account manager, arising as a direct result of carrying out your internal sales duties.

I will be asking you about specific instances of conflict you have experienced within your organisation and the behaviours you adopted to manage the situation. Were you aggressive, cooperative, collaborative or completely passive avoiding the conflict at all costs. Did you adapt your style to the situation to suit the others involved in order to get the best result. Remember this will be your account of your experiences told in your own words.

3. Finally I will summarise with one or two questions regarding the frequency or abundance of conflicts which you experience within the organisation. Is it a regular occurrence or rare, do these incidents happen once in a while or are they like buses, numerous come all at once when least expected.

I hope this helps you to understand what the phenomenon is that I am trying to investigate and gives you an idea of the context of the research. Everything is confidential; no details of participants or organisations will ever be disclosed. All transcripts and data will be destroyed upon completion.

Thank you again for your participation, should you require any further information please do not hesitate to call in the meantime I look forward to meeting you soon.

Regards

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Appendix A-3

Respondent Profile Questionnaire



Conflict and the Key Account Manager's Internal Selling Role

Respondent Profiles

ATTRIBUTE

Participating Organisation:

Name:

Job Title:

Responsibilities:

Gender:

Age:

Time in current role:

Time, experience as a key account manager:

No of customers / Key Accounts:

Location, Field / Office Based:

Product category, Manufacturer Brand / Retail Brand:

INTERVIEW NOTES

Date of interview:

Venue:

Notes:

Appendix B

Summary of Participant Attributes

| Name | Age | Length of Interview (minutes) | Total Number of Critical Incidents Described | +ve | -ve | Gender | Time in Current Role | Total KAM Experience | Number of Direct Reports | Number of Customers | Location | Product Category |
|----------|-----|-------------------------------|--|-----|-----|--------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|----------|------------------|
| Stuart | 39 | 49 | 3 | 2 | 1 | M | 2y 4m | 20y+ | 0 | 5 | Field | Retail Brand |
| Gerald | 39 | 44 | 3 | 3 | 0 | M | 1y | 3y 6m | 1 | 1 | Office | Retail Brand |
| Neil | 46 | 38 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 11m | 20y+ | 0 | 2 | Field | Brand |
| Dirk | 37 | 53 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 10m | 9y | 0 | 3 | Field | Brand |
| Jonathan | 34 | 38 | 3 | 2 | 1 | M | 8m | 5y | 0 | 22 | Field | Brand |
| Paul | 32 | 48 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 2y 4m | 7y | 0 | 5 | Field | Retail Brand |
| David | 39 | 38 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 3y | 5y | 2 | 3 | Field | Brand |
| Stephen | 50 | 34 | 3 | 2 | 1 | M | 1y 4m | 10y | 0 | 3 | Field | Brand |
| Carl | 42 | 38 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 2y 4m | 12y | 0 | 1 | Field | Brand |
| Peter | 33 | 44 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 4y | 7y | 0 | 4 | Field | Brand |
| Kevin | 41 | 31 | 3 | 3 | 0 | M | 5y | 9y | 0 | 3 | Field | Brand |
| Albert | 55 | 50 | 4 | 3 | 1 | M | 10y | 35y | 0 | 3 | Field | Retail Brand |
| Wendy | 41 | 32 | 5 | 3 | 2 | F | 3m | 7y | 3 | 1 | Office | Retail Brand |
| Carl | 36 | 34 | 3 | 3 | 0 | M | 18m | 12y | 0 | 14 | Field | Retail Brand |
| Frank | 33 | 34 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 2y 4m | 2y | 0 | 1 | Office | Retail Brand |
| William | 32 | 43 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 9m | 9y | 2 | 3 | Office | Brand |
| James | 29 | 30 | 5 | 4 | 1 | M | 18m | 5y | 2 | 1 | Office | Brand |
| Anna | 30 | 37 | 4 | 2 | 2 | F | 12m | 7y | 2 | 2 | Office | Brand |
| Vincent | 49 | 47 | 5 | 4 | 1 | M | 18m | 30y | 2 | 1 | Office | Brand |
| Jane | 32 | 43 | 5 | 3 | 2 | F | 20m | 5y | 3 | 1 | Office | Brand |
| Larry | 26 | 35 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 10m | 3y 6m | 0 | 8 | Office | Brand |
| Robert | 34 | 42 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 10m | 3y | 0 | 1 | Field | Brand |
| Cliff | 34 | 43 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 2y | 6y | 0 | 1 | Field | Brand |
| Kenny | 34 | 44 | 3 | 2 | 1 | M | 10m | 3y | 1 | 1 | Field | Brand |
| Joseph | 34 | 34 | 5 | 3 | 2 | M | 1y | 3y 6m | 1 | 1 | Field | Brand |
| Rose | 48 | 24 | 3 | 2 | 1 | F | 2.5y | 23y | 0 | 1 | Office | Brand |
| Ruben | 44 | 34 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 2y | 17y | 3 | 3 | Office | Brand |
| Max | 46 | 32 | 4 | 2 | 2 | M | 4y | 23y | 0 | 1 | Office | Brand |
| Dean | 38 | 27 | 3 | 2 | 1 | M | 18m | 10y | 1 | 1 | Office | Brand |

Appendix C

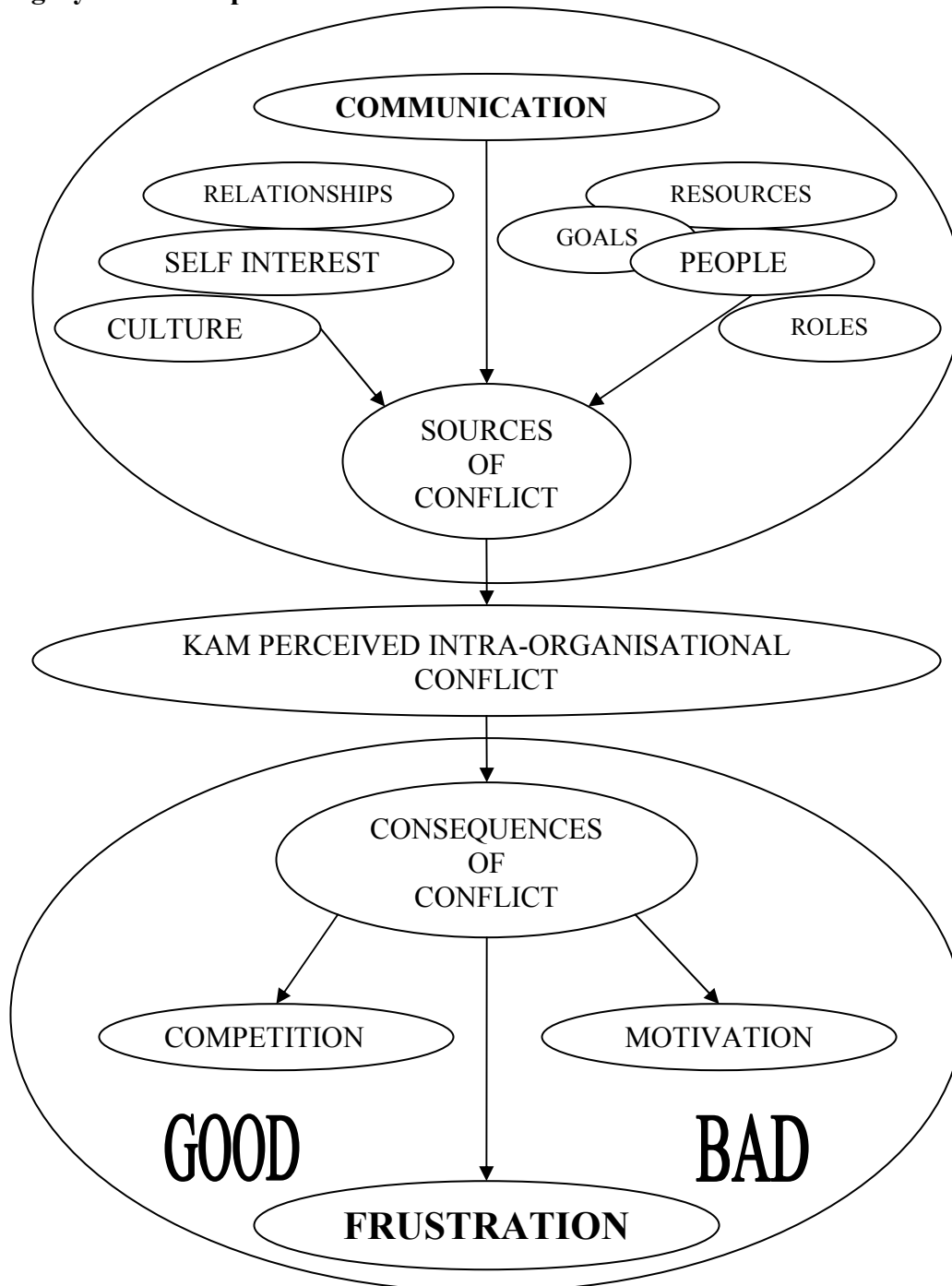
KAM: Summary of Job Titles

| | |
|------|---------------------------------|
| SNAM | Senior National Account Manager |
| NAM | National Account Manager |
| SCM | Senior Channel Manager |
| CM | Channel Manager |
| CC | Category Controller |
| KAM | Key Account Manager |
| AD | Account Director |
| NAC | National Account Controller |
| BDM | Business Development Manager |
| AE | Account Executive |
| SAE | Senior Account Executive |

Appendix D-1

CODING MEMO 1 – The Perceived Nature of Conflict

The next stage in the analysis of the transcripts was to investigate what conflict looks like to the key account manager, where it comes from, what it is like, how it feels. The cluster diagram from the coding is displayed below, showing the category relationships.



Cluster diagram: The Perceived Nature of Conflict

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the key account manager's perception of conflict within the organisation, where it comes from and what it looks like. Many sources of conflict were identified and more than anything else for the key account managers interviewed the perception is that **Communication** is key. For the key account managers, the conflict they experience within the organisation is perceived to be **unnecessary**. There is a feeling of a lack of communication or poor communication. This is occurring when **organisational strategy** does not fit the **sales strategy; marketing, brand or new product development strategy** does not suit the sales or **customer strategy; or when the internal departments** are not clear on the customer strategies.

It is not just **misalignment of strategy**; people within the organisation have their **own ways of doing things** and **views of sales** which create barriers. People just do not get on, have personality clashes or other personal issues which prevent **open communication** and create conflicts.

Key account managers are not always seen as representing their own **organisation's needs**, as having crossed too far into their **customers' needs**. They can be seen as those within the organisation who make life difficult for others, who make unreasonable demands and go against the capabilities of the organisation. It is not always clear to all departments what the sales strategy is and how this fits with their goals and **roles**.

Conflict frequently occurs within the key account management teams, through competition for **resources** and the perception of misaligned **targets** or goals – the feeling of doing all the work for the team or of having to fight for every opportunity to go their accounts' way. For the key account manager the **customer** also creates issues within the organisation or is viewed to be the cause of all conflict. In representing their customer's needs internally key account managers constantly deal with a **wide range of issues** in order to maintain **customer satisfaction**.

Further investigation reveals how the participants feel about conflict within the organisation, what it means to their roles. The overwhelming response was a feeling of **frustration** at having to deal with issues which they perceive to be **unnecessary** due to the lack of communication. This frustration is **not always a bad thing**, it stimulates some to perform and improve communications, to engage other departments and work toward **customer and organisation focused solutions**. However, continued frustration and competition **wears the key account manager down** and reduces **enthusiasm** for their role.

For those interviewed, the findings can be summarised into two categories, **sources** and **consequences** of conflict. From memo writing while coding, cluster diagrams were used to show the relationships between the categories identified. It is these cluster diagrams which lead to the expansion of the diagrammatic representation of the findings.

Source: Compiled by author 22/06/2008

Appendix D-2

QSR NVivo 8.0 Tree Node Summary: The Nature of Conflict

Tree Nodes

| Name |
|-----------------------------|
| Organisational Conflict |
| Conflict Management |
| The Nature of Conflict |
| Sources of Conflict |
| Departments |
| Marketing |
| Finance |
| Senior Management |
| Production |
| NPD |
| Technical |
| New Products |
| Developmant |
| Key Accounts |
| Other KAMs |
| Customer Services |
| Supply Chain |
| Human Resources |
| Situations or Circumstances |
| Consequences of Conflict |
| Positives |
| Challenges |
| Motivation |
| Competition |
| Negatives |
| Frustration |
| Challenges |
| De-motivation |
| Dimensions |
| Departments |
| Marketing |
| Finance |
| Senior Management |
| Production |
| NPD |
| Key Accounts |
| Customer Services |
| Supply Chain |
| Human Resources |
| Frequency of Conflict |

Appendix E

Summary of the Sources of Conflict by Perceived Relationship or Department

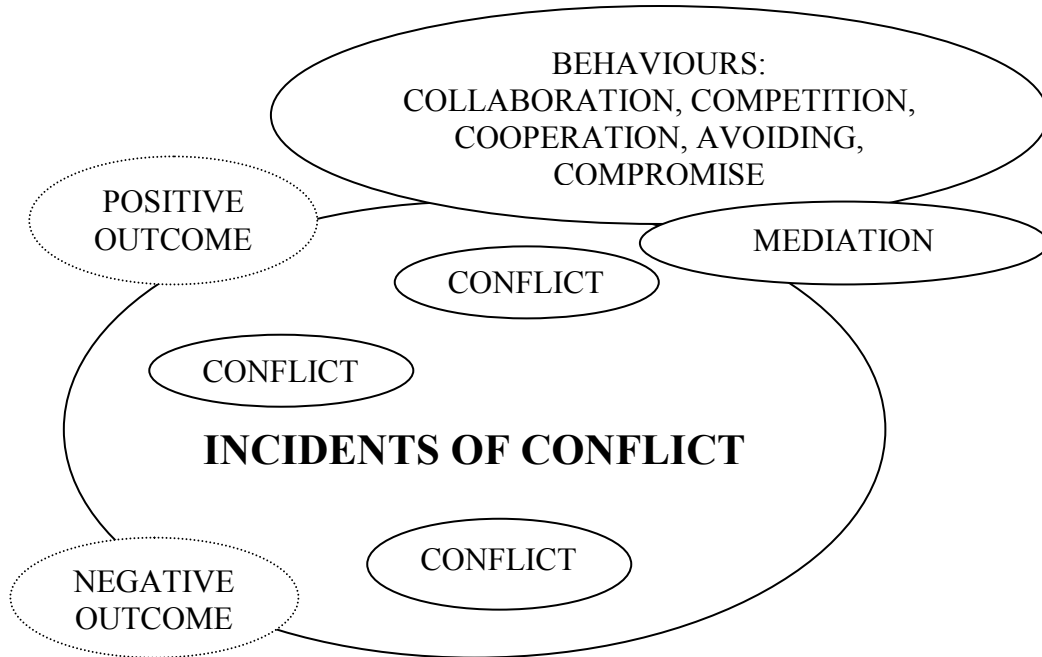
| Communication | No. of Incidents | Resources | No. of Incidents | Roles | No. of Incidents | Structure and Culture | No. of Incidents |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Marketing | 14 | Marketing | 21 | Marketing | 9 | Senior Management | 4 |
| Finance | 9 | Finance | 12 | KAMs ⁷ | 9 | Marketing | 2 |
| Senior Management | 7 | Senior Management | 7 | Senior Management | 8 | KAMs | 1 |
| Production and Planning | 7 | NPD and Technical | 7 | Production and Planning | 3 | Finance | 1 |
| NPD and Technical | 5 | Production and Planning | 4 | Finance | 2 | Production and Planning | 0 |
| KAMs | 3 | Supply Chain | 2 | NPD and Technical | 1 | NPD and Technical | 0 |
| Customer Services | 2 | KAMs | 0 | IT | 1 | Supply Chain | 0 |
| Supply Chain | 2 | | 53 | Customer Services | 1 | | 8 |
| HR | 1 | | | Supply Chain | 0 | | |
| | 50 | | | | 34 | | |
| People | No. of Incidents | Goals | No. of Incidents | Self Interest | No. of Incidents | | |
| KAMs | 12 | Marketing | 9 | Senior Management | 3 | | |
| Marketing | 9 | KAMs | 5 | KAMs | 2 | | |
| Senior Management | 7 | Senior Management | 3 | Marketing | 1 | | |
| Production and Planning | 5 | Finance | 2 | Production and Planning | 1 | | |
| Finance | 4 | Production and Planning | 2 | Finance | 0 | | |
| NPD and Technical | 1 | NPD and Technical | 0 | NPD and Technical | 0 | | |
| IT | 1 | Supply Chain | 0 | Supply Chain | 0 | | |
| Supply Chain | 0 | | 21 | | 7 | | |
| | 39 | | | | | | |

⁷ KAMs throughout the tables refers to other key account managers.

Appendix F-1

CODING MEMO 2 – CIT, Conflict Management Behaviours

Managing intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts. Theme 2 under investigation is management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict from the key account management perspective; i.e., what behaviours the key account managers adopt when in a conflict situation.



*Cluster diagram:
The Management of Conflict*

All the transcripts were analysed using NVivo 8.0, looking specifically at the behaviours the key account managers adopt. Later each of the 112 incidents were analysed and summarised in a table for future reference. Thomas' (1976) behaviours were used in the analysis; collaboration, competition, avoidance, compromise and compromise. Although the research takes a grounded approach, the key account managers did in fact use these terms widely, therefore as behaviours they act as excellent sub-categories.

Having explored the sources of conflict, those identified in theme one were used again in the exploration of the critical incidents in order to see which behaviours are used with which source of conflict.

Since incidents were described with both a **positive and negative** outcome, the next step was to look at the behaviours to see which are the most effective – this being the key question in the exploration of this theme.

Multiple Behaviours: The key account managers described a number of behaviours and described **changing behaviours** in order to achieve the best possible outcome. The predominant behaviour described is **collaboration** – this behaviour is used with competing or forcing. Being key account managers with a number of years' experience the natural tendency is to collaborate. They want to work as part of a productive team. However, when things do not go their way they become frustrated, angry and use more forceful behaviours to obtain the right result.

Outcomes: Interestingly, collaborative behaviours do not always get the required results. Many of the incidents described had a negative outcome but the predominant behaviour was collaboration. Reflecting on this, the key account managers stated they should have been more forceful. It seems the key account managers' choice of behaviour is somewhere between collaboration and compromise.

Avoidance was also mentioned on a number of occasions and seems to be related to roles and people as the source of conflict. When it comes down to the individuals involved, the key account manager would rather avoid the situation. When these conflicts are handled, again, collaboration is preferred but the outcome is more frequently negative.

Next steps are to look at the source of conflict by department, what behaviours are used when dealing with the other departments.

Most of the conflict seems to come from Marketing and Finance. Again, the preferred behaviour seems to be collaboration and outcome is more positive.

If conflict is good in the organisation, given the amount that seems to come from marketing and finance which works out as positive, this has to be good for the teams involved and the customer.

Mediation as a technique more than behaviour did crop up on a number of occasions. This could really be a form of collaboration, using others for leverage.

Source: Compiled by author 29/06/2008

Appendix F-2

QSR NVivo 8.0 Tree Node Summary: Conflict Management Behaviours

Tree Nodes

| Name |
|--------------------------------|
| Organisational Conflict |
| Conflict Management |
| Conflict Management Behaviours |
| Collaboration |
| Discussion |
| Meetings |
| Argued |
| Behaviour Styles |
| Avoiding |
| Ignored |
| Swept under the carpet |
| Compromising |
| Accommodating |
| Go with the flow |
| Do as told |
| Competing |
| Forcing |
| Forced |
| Aggression |
| Fighting |
| Challenging behaviours |
| Argued |
| Cooperating |
| Skills |
| Mediation |
| Involving Others |
| Senior Managers |
| Leverage |
| Senior Influence |
| Customer |
| Influence |
| Multiple Behaviours |
| Outcomes |
| Good |
| Bad |
| Learning |
| The Nature of Conflict |
| Frequency of Conflict |

Appendix G-1

Summary of CIT Incidents Described

| Incident | Key Account Manager | Positive or Negative Outcome to the Critical Incidents Described | Perceived Situational Source of Conflict | Perceived Source of Conflict by Department | Brief Synopsis of the Incidents of Conflict Described | Conflict Management Behaviours Adopted |
|-----------------|----------------------------|---|---|---|--|---|
| 1 | Stuart | +ve | Communication | Marketing | NPD, new product launch into a retailer, 'blue sky' development working with marketing. Product launch agreed. | Collaboration |
| 2 | | +ve | Resources | Senior Management, Production and Supply Chain | Production changes, consolidation two plants into one. Had customer supply implications. Supply demands met through clear communication of the requirements. | Collaboration |
| 3 | | -ve | Communication | Senior Management | Sales targets, objectives not in line with KAM expectations. Targets did not change, issues put on a back burner. | Collaboration and Avoidance |
| 4 | Gerald | +ve | Resources | Planning | Extra free promotion within a customer across a product category. Agreeing forecast for the purchase of components, then being left with surplus stock. Surplus stock sold and future activity agreed, used a combination of behaviours. | Collaboration and Competing |
| 5 | | +ve | People | Production | Wanting to achieve additional volume of the production line to meet customer demands, wanting priority. Clear demands and statements of customer intent got the required result. | Competing |

| | | | | | | |
|----|----------|-----|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| 6 | | +ve | Communication | NPD, technical | New product launch, signing off artwork before production. NPD delivered behaviours developed into a more collaborative approach. | Competing and Collaboration |
| 7 | Neil | +ve | Communication and People | Finance | Changing the structure of an account base, simplifying terms. Clear communication resulted in the change in terms. | Collaboration |
| 8 | | +ve | People | Senior Management | Challenging sales target and forecasts. Targets adjusted to reflect account potential. | Collaboration |
| 9 | | -ve | People and Roles | KAMs | Challenging colleagues on their roles and how they conduct business. Direct approach did not work, colleagues responded negatively. | Competing |
| 10 | | -ve | Roles | Senior Management | Price increase discussions with senior management presenting the customer viewpoint. Price increases were forced through regardless. | Collaborating |
| 11 | Dirk | +ve | Resources | Marketing | Christmas promotional mechanic in a retailer, exceeding marketing expectations. Collaboration to gain additional resources and meet customer expectations. | Collaborating |
| 12 | | +ve | Resources and Goals | Marketing | Request for a particular promotional mechanic denied since it did not fit with marketing strategy. New mechanic delivered. | Collaborating |
| 13 | | -ve | Resources and Communication | Finance and Marketing | Required margin enhancement to maintain a product listing in a major retailer. Lack of resources led to the issue being agitated, listings lost. | Collaborating |
| 14 | | -ve | Communication and Resource | Marketing | Request for additional marketing support for a customer. Issues escalated to include senior managers still with no positive outcome. | Mediation |
| 15 | Jonathan | +ve | People and Communication | Marketing | Appointment with marketing cancelled after six weeks in the diary, essential meeting to meet objectives. Issue escalated to increase priority, conflict mitigated after subsequent meetings. | Competing and Mediation |

| | | | | | | |
|----|-------|-----|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|
| 16 | | +ve | Communication | Finance | Pricing, reviewing customer terms without finance buy in. Direct approach initially to force the best price, reverted to a more collaborative approach. | Competing and Collaborating |
| 17 | | -ve | People and Communication | Marketing | Issues with a colleague who never returns call and always has the answer machine on. Direct angry approach, de-motivated the other person resulting in less positive communications. | Competing |
| 18 | Paul | +ve | Resources and People | Senior Management | Forced to push through a price increase to 'under sell' to the customer to force the customer away. Reviewed the policy with senior management delivered a mutually acceptable solution. | Collaborating |
| 19 | | +ve | Resources | Production and Planning | Business objective clashing with customer objective, being forced to re-package product rather than supply a customer. Product sold on without re-packaging. | Collaborating |
| 20 | | -ve | Communication | Production and Senior Management | Changing the production sites to reduce cost, poor planning resulted in customer shortages. Many conflicts in one with many approaches. The re-organisation resulted in a negative effect. | Collaborating and Competing, then Avoiding |
| 21 | | -ve | Resources | Senior Management | Changing goal posts with regard to bonus payments, having to re-negotiate bonus term internally. De-motivated the key account manager, nothing changed. | Collaborating |
| 22 | David | +ve | Communication | Human Resources | Unclear objectives on a training course resulting in missed views and clashes over the training process. Collaborative approach brought individuals together and resolved any confusion. | Collaboration |
| 23 | | +ve | Goals, Roles and Communication | Marketing | A customer wanting to take a brand strategy not in line with the company brand strategy. New strategy delivered. | Collaboration |
| 24 | | -ve | Resources | Senior Management | Disagreements over the company car policy. De-motivated key account manager and KAM team, no resolution, still an active issue. | Collaboration and Accommodation |

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|----|---------|-----|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| 25 | | -ve | Goals and Roles | KAMs | Negotiation of team objective, disagreements over responsibilities. The forced approach gains the result, clear explanation of goals and roles. | Collaboration and Competing |
| 26 | Stephen | +ve | Resources | Finance | Internal negotiation to increase customer promotional spending. New promotions delivered. | Collaboration |
| 27 | | +ve | Resources and Communication | Marketing | Convincing the brand team to invest in additional customer bespoke promotional activity. New activity again delivered through presentation of a solid commercial plan. | Collaboration |
| 28 | | -ve | Resources | Finance | Re-negotiating customer terms internally to match volume requirements. The plan delivers the resources so no change, now the issue is just avoided. | Collaboration and Avoidance |
| 29 | Carl | +ve | Communication | Supply Chain | Product not being delivered into a customer. Customer demands met once full requirement communicated to the right department. | Collaboration |
| 30 | | +ve | Roles | Senior Management | Being delegated additional responsibility at the last minute. Accepting the responsibility reluctantly and explaining the limitations. | Competing and Accommodation |
| 31 | | -ve | Communication and Self Interest | Customer | A customer pricing error. Competing internal changes to terms on a product launch. The pricing had to change, however despite best efforts nothing happened. | Collaboration |
| 32 | | -ve | Roles and Culture | Senior Management | Re-structuring. Extensive project work and research fell on deaf ears, de-motivating the key account manager. | Cooperating |
| 33 | Peter | +ve | Resources and People | Marketing and NPD technical | Project management of a new product dispense system. New system delivered to the customer. | Collaborating and Competing |
| 34 | | +ve | Resources and Communication | Marketing and NPD | Product re-packaging requirement by the customer. Product development achieved. | Collaborating |
| 35 | | -ve | People | KAMs | Internal communications e-mail resulting in misinterpretation of the detail. Direct approach, pointing out the errors just increased the tension in the relationships. | Competing |

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|----|--------|-----|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 36 | | -ve | Roles and Culture | Senior Management | Re-organisation and the mitigation of redundancies. The agenda was set, any attempt to change things failed, simply had to go along with the plans. | Collaboration and Compromise |
| 37 | Kevin | +ve | Resources | Marketing and NPD technical | Customers wanting to launch a new product variant which could not be made available. Extensive meeting resolved the issue, product delivered. | Collaboration |
| 38 | | +ve | Culture, Resources and People | Senior Management | Re-organisation, change of internal structures, communication of changes to colleagues. Open honest communication of changes in a difficult re-organisation kept tension low. | Collaboration |
| 39 | | +ve | Communication | Marketing | NPD to meet customer requirement, change in product specification. Product delivered. | Collaboration |
| 40 | Albert | +ve | Communication and Roles | NPD technical | New product launch, issues with packaging which could not be signed off due to the right people being absent. Packaging issues dealt with and product delivered. | Collaboration |
| 41 | | +ve | Self Interest and People | Planning | Requirement for increased promotional volume of product into a customer at short notice. Production and supply chain simply told to deliver or else... | Competing |
| 42 | | +ve | Goals and Roles | Planning | Again extra product required by the customer at short notice. Achieved the best results possible kind of half way. | Cooperating |
| 43 | | -ve | Resources | NPD technical | New product development, required packaging not available with the time scales laid out. All attempts at achieving the NPD failed and the key account manager had to resort to NPD timelines. | Collaborating and Accommodating |
| 44 | Wendy | +ve | Roles and people | Planning | Revised customer forecast causing planning difficulty. Clearer communication of requirements. | Collaboration |
| 45 | | +ve | Culture, Resources and People | Marketing | NPD within the customer not meeting the marketing plan requirements. Marketing told what will deliver in the customer and what will not, without compromise or extensive effort. NPD delivered. | Competing |

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|----|--------|-----|--|-----------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| 46 | | +ve | Communication | Customer and Planning | The customer pulled a promotion while the planned volume was in production; the product still needed to be sold and was. | Collaboration |
| 47 | | -ve | Communication | Planning | Changes in the account forecast not communicated accurately and demands from the customers increasing. The key account manager went with the flow knowing the issue would just eventually go away. | Avoidance and Accommodating |
| 48 | | -ve | Roles and People | KAMs | Internal issues over the way in which roles are carried out requiring discipline. Discipline is difficult and was avoided then tentatively dealt with. Required much more collaboration. | Accommodating and Avoidance |
| 49 | Carlos | +ve | People and Communication | KAMs | Internal issues over account responsibility since the account perceived unfair competition for resources with the same key account manager. Clarification of responsibility through setting out the expectations of the key account manager. | Competing |
| 50 | | +ve | People, Goals, Roles and Self Interest | Senior Management | A team member was recruited without the key account manager's knowledge. All recruitment had to be explained, however the one recruited remained. | Collaboration and Accommodation |
| 51 | | +ve | Resources and Communication | NPD and Planning | The customer pulled the business after all the packaging components had been purchased. Launch re-scheduled. | Collaboration |
| 52 | Frank | +ve | People and Communication | Planning | Changes in packaging requirement by the customer resulting in changes to the forecasting and planning. New plans and forecast set up. | Collaboration |
| 53 | | +ve | Resources | NPD | Changing the customer packaging incurring additional costs. Costs were absorbed not passed on to the customer. | Collaboration |
| 54 | | -ve | People and Roles | Senior Management | Internal auditing. Created tension and de-motivated the key account manager, nothing could be done. | Avoidance and Accommodating |

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|----|---------|-----|--|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| 55 | | -ve | Resources | Finance and Senior Management | Pulling together a new tender document requiring multiple input and commercial validation. | Collaboration |
| 56 | William | +ve | People and Communication | Planning | Internal communication with account analysts being met with hostility. Explanation of requirement resolved the issue. | Collaboration |
| 57 | | +ve | People, Goals and Roles | KAMs | Team responsibility and accountability being matched to the role requirement. Clear explanation of role requirements. | Collaborating |
| 58 | | -ve | People, Goals, Roles and Self Interest | Marketing | NPD and product launch not seen as a viable opportunity in the account base. The key account manager had to follow the marketing plan regardless. NPD failed. | Accommodating |
| 59 | | -ve | Roles and Self Interest | KAMs | A direct report to the key account manager not finishing an important task resulting in the account, customer having issues. Angry response resulted in de-motivated colleague and increased tension. | Competing |
| 60 | James | +ve | Communication and Resources | Marketing and NPD | Change of product specification not in line with the customer requirements. NPD delivered to customer specification. | Collaborating |
| 61 | | +ve | Communication, Roles and People | Finance | Internal agreement for the change in packaging requirements and cost analysis. All costs agreed through extensive commercial research. | Collaborating |
| 62 | | +ve | People | KAMs | Conversation with a colleague described simply as being given grief. Tension in the team resulting in poor choice of words. The key account manager went with the flow rather than rising to the bait. | Accommodating and Collaborating |
| 63 | | +ve | Self Interest and People | Senior Management | Unacceptable re-forecast and targets given with a product launch, not realistic or in line with customer potential. Meeting to address issues resolved them. | Collaborating |
| 64 | | -ve | Communication | KAMS | Direct report not delivering against targets perception of lack of understanding. Initial competing tactics, being the boss failed. More collaborative approach mitigated. | Competing and Collaboration |

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|----|---------|-----|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| 65 | Anna | +ve | Roles, People and Goals | KAMs | Re-structuring, role re-assessment. Potential tension resolved. | Collaboration |
| 66 | | +ve | Communication, Goals and Roles | Marketing | Customer requirement for a bespoke promotion not in line with current brand strategy. Promotional strategy eventually agreed. | Collaboration |
| 67 | | -ve | Roles and people | KAMs | Role re-assessment of a direct report following absence. Changes in structure resulted in de-motivation; the changes could not be undone. | Collaboration |
| 68 | | -ve | Communication | Production | Special promotion pack agreed for a customer but supply restraint meant delivery could not be made. Despite attempts to resolve nothing changed. | Accommodating |
| 69 | Vincent | +ve | Communication, Goals and Roles | Senior Management | Unexpected forecasting meeting requiring preparation with unclear instructions. Extensive planning and preparation for subsequent meeting reversed the tension. | Collaboration |
| 70 | | +ve | Communication, Roles and People | KAMs | Direct report continually not performing to standard and missing deliverables. Left issue alone and allowed the individual to develop at their own pace. | Accommodating and Avoiding |
| 71 | | +ve | Resources, Roles and Goals | Marketing | Presenting a new customer promotional opportunity outside of the marketing strategy. Strategy agreed after first competing the issue then clearly explaining the requirement. | Competing and Collaborating |
| 72 | | +ve | Resources and Communication | Marketing | Promotional strategy within the customer not in line with marketing strategy, internal discussion to meet customer needs. | Collaborating |
| 73 | | -ve | Resources and Communication | Marketing and Finance | Promotional activity outside of normal parameters proposed and rejected internally. | Collaboration |
| 74 | Jane | +ve | Communication, Goals and Roles | Marketing and Senior Management | New product launch expected to deliver unrealistic volumes within the customer, this needed internal communication to re-assess the targets, new targets agreed. | Collaboration |

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|----|--------|-----|--------------------------------------|-------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| 75 | | +ve | Communication | Supply Chain | New product in store distribution targets being challenged in a meeting by non-customer focused management. Message forced from the KAM team. | Competing |
| 76 | | +ve | Communication and People | Senior Management | After an absence the customer relationship deteriorated and the internal expectation was that the key account manager could just instantly repair the damage. | Collaborating |
| 77 | | -ve | People | KAMs | Direct report not delivering against targets and generally underperforming resulting in the customer perception that the team is not focused. Issue dealt with badly originally quite forced, then a more collaborative approach. Individual moved on. | Competing |
| 78 | | -ve | Resources and Communication | Marketing | Marketing and trade strategy wanting to launch a product at an uncompetitive price point. | Competing |
| 79 | Larry | +ve | Resources, communication and People | Finance | Account continually put on stop as the terms did not meet the customer requirement. New terms agreed after extensive meetings. | Competing and Collaboration |
| 80 | | +ve | Resources and Roles | Marketing | Implementation of a specific account focused strategy not in line with brand strategy. | Collaboration |
| 81 | | -ve | Communication | Planning | Stock not available for customer promotion. Promotional volume not delivered, account relationship damaged. | Competing and Collaboration |
| 82 | | -ve | Communication and Roles | Customer Services | Last minute request for additional data before a customer meeting which was already running late. | Competing and Avoiding |
| 83 | Robert | +ve | Communication, Resources and Culture | Senior Management | Agreeing a new customer pricing structure later to be implemented. | Collaboration |
| 84 | | +ve | Resources and People | Marketing | Proposed NPD development which could have an adverse effect on current products listed within the customer. | Competing and Collaborating |
| 85 | | -ve | Roles and People | Marketing | Meeting to establish new product pricing between account and marketing teams. | Collaboration |

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|----|--------|-------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| 86 | | -ve | Resources | Marketing and Supply Chain | New product configuration proposition to increase sales. Proposition never developed. | Collaboration |
| 87 | Cliff | +ve | Resources and Culture | Marketing | Customer requesting better than current promotional activity, internal meetings to discuss. | Collaboration |
| 88 | | +ve | Resources | Finance and Senior Management | Re-negotiation of terms with a key customer. Extensive internal negotiations resulted in agreed terms. | Collaboration |
| 89 | | -ve | Self Interest and People | Senior Management | Targets not in line with the account capability. A need to change the target, no response de-motivating the key account manager | Collaboration and Competing. |
| 90 | | -ve | Resources | Finance | Changing customer's terms to meet the customer requirement. Terms did not change, this was a smaller customer. | Collaboration and Competing |
| 91 | | Kenny | +ve | Communication | Marketing | Customer not wanting a new product, genuine account objections to be communicated to the brand team. Product not launched. |
| 92 | +ve | | Communication | Marketing | Detailed information required to support NPD. Initial reluctance to support given time restraints and work load. Meeting resulted in brand team buy in. | Collaboration |
| 93 | -ve | | Resource and Communication | Finance | NPD product launch, pricing with the customer not in line with the expected return or budget. Lack of involvement by the finance team led to the whole issue falling on deaf ears. The launch was postponed. | Collaboration |
| 94 | Joseph | +ve | People, Goals and Roles | Marketing | Managing non-direct reports with different agendas, goals and degrees of enthusiasm for the key account manager's account. Maintaining almost constant collaboration to keep interest levels high. | Collaboration |
| 95 | | +ve | Goals | Marketing | Pressure to launch a special promotional pack which exposed too much risk with the customer. The key account manager put foot down and the promotional pack did not get launched. | Competing |

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|-----|-------|-----|------------------------------|-------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| 96 | | +ve | Roles and Goals | Planning | Having to agree forecast which suited planning but not the customer. Planning on a different agenda. Agreement to suit both was reached, but a frustrating process. | Collaboration and Competing |
| 97 | | -ve | Goals and Self Interest | KAMs | Poor forecasting and a product launch left other accounts exposed to more volume and risk. It was a go with the flow situation since the key account manager did not want the stock in the customer. | Avoidance and Accommodating |
| 98 | | -ve | Goals and People | Finance | Retrieval of accounts owing from a large customer. Continual badgering by the accountant responsible. A fight not worth fighting, the issue was left to resolve itself but increased tension between departments. | Avoidance |
| 99 | Rose | +ve | Communication | Marketing | The brand team were required to provide market information and didn't. Clear explanation of the requirement resulted in the information being made available. | Collaboration |
| 100 | | +ve | Communication | Third party | Requirement of a third party supplier to provide detailed information. Detail only provided after extensive discussions on the urgency of the information. | Collaboration |
| 101 | | -ve | People | KAMs | 360 feedback sessions making individuals feel uncomfortable. Individuals just did not want to face the conflicts. | Avoidance and Accommodating |
| 102 | Ruben | +ve | Resources and Communication. | Finance | Customer interpretation of payment terms resulted in continued late payment and internal conflict with finance. Terms were changed and the issue resolved. | Collaboration |
| 103 | | +ve | Resources and Communication | Marketing | Promotional support for product required. Good persuasive arguments provided the solution. | Collaboration |
| 104 | | -ve | Communication | Senior Management | Needed agreement for a new distribution channel and all answers were vague. Lack of information forced action and the channel was not opened. | Competing |

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|-----|------|-----|----------------------------|-----------|--|-----------------------------|
| 105 | | -ve | Communication | Finance | Issues with an individual who does not fully understand the account needs, who remains focused purely on the finance issue. The individual remains in the same position and the conflict repeats itself over and over. | Collaboration and Competing |
| 106 | Max | +ve | Resources | Marketing | Additional funds required for a product launch into a new sector. The launch was successful. | Collaboration |
| 107 | | +ve | Roles and Goals | Marketing | Analyst not able to deliver the right market information or reluctant to do so. Through discussion training needs developed and the analyst improved. | Collaboration |
| 108 | | -ve | Resources and People | Marketing | Allocation of resources did not meet the customer requirement. Perceived lack of support. | Competing |
| 109 | | -ve | People and Roles | IT | Creating a business support model that meets the KAM objectives. The IT specialists had their own ideas and it was a battle not worth fighting. | Avoidance and Accommodating |
| 110 | Dean | +ve | Resources and Culture | Finance | Changing payment terms in a major customer who has become aware that their terms are not as good as others. The terms had to be changed to maintain the business relationship. | Collaboration and Competing |
| 111 | | +ve | Roles, Goals and People | KAMs | Role changes within the team and the team member not being satisfied with the changes. Continued to look after the person's best interest. | Collaborating |
| 112 | | -ve | Resources, Roles and Goals | Finance | Pricing issues with a customer. Internal negotiations to attempt to meet the customer need. Changes not delivered. | Competing |

Appendix G -2

Contextual Examples of the Incidents Described

(In order to uphold confidentiality any real names or other elements of the text which could identify the participant or their organisation have been withheld)

Incident 56, +ve Outcome – William, Company E

In this incident, William (company E) describes a conflict situation with a support function, where the person responsible was not meeting the key account manager's expectations in terms of delivering the required material. This issues was resolved to both parties satisfaction demonstrating collaborative behaviour:

“... We've got support functions that help us within our role, one of which is a trade deductions analyst. Now because I look after three accounts there are two trade deductions analysts, that don't report into me but have a dotted line into the account. One of the deductions analysts was looking after the two biggest accounts within my portfolio and one was looking after the smallest, um, whilst also looking after some other bigger accounts. Um, within the first week I sat down with every member of the team to understand what they did. Where the conflict arose with this individual was because straight away I was told,

“I haven't done anything on your account just because it's not my priority”.

That's not great for me because it's a priority for me, so how did I get around this conflict? I could have sat there and said well just bloody well do it, it's your job. The person themselves, um, is quite defensive and quite fiery but absolutely soft once you get to know them and I kind of knew this so rather than having this conversation, eh, with everybody else around so people get entrenched I said,

“Well I'll tell you what, let's go for a coffee”.

We went downstairs to the coffee had a coffee, taking that person out of the general situation. They explained or understood why nothing had been done for so long, um, understood that but then drew a line in the sand and said,

“That’s fine but that can’t continue”.

I gave a list of the reasons why it can’t continue but also explained how I would be dealing with it ongoing and what my manner would be and to the point where I said, “Look, I can be quite blunt sometimes and if I’m being blunt and it’s affecting what you’re doing and if I’m sat telling you you’re not doing your job, I need it done and you’re, you’re not comfortable with that, I’d like you to ask me or, or certainly take me to one side or say look I’m not comfortable with where you’re driving, we need to approach it from a different angle and I got their buy-in and said,

“Look, I’m not going to railroad you on it, we need to do it, we need to resolve what, what’s not happening and move on and I’ll be, I’ll instigate ongoing meetings to see that, not check-ups, but ongoing meetings to see that we’re on the same path”.

That’s collaboration and worked fantastically well because within a space of two weeks that person got through the backlog of work and then got it to a position now where it’s, you know, it’s a class above everything else...”

Source: Compiled by author 01/02/2008

Incident 96, +ve Outcome – Joseph, Company F

In this incident the key account manager, Joseph (company F) describes a conflict situation with the planning department which in turn has an effect on the account performance a forecasts. The issues revolves around the account stock holding and production forecast where collaboration and competing behaviours are demonstrated in order to achieve a perceived positive outcome:

“... Yeah I’ll give you a live one or relatively live. We had a horrendous January, volume wise and we’ve got a new MD and our Trading Director and our Vice President of Sales both obviously want to hit their numbers the first month of the new MD being there. My account is a massive chunk of the business and we had our worst volume period as far back as the records will let me go which is January 2003. I mean we missed, phew 45%, worse than our worst ever period before that. It creates a little bit of concern in the business and this is where I do things eight times in five days because everyone wants to know what the hell is going on. Why aren’t they buying

any volume? Um you know did nearly five million units in December, we would normally do I think, the worst ever period about 1.8 million and we did a million in January so it is bad and you have to justify why.

Um you can worry about it and you can sit there and panic about it or you can look for the reasons. The, the thing I think where I dealt with it well is you have to separate the fact that it's happening. Is there anything I can physically do to stop it happening? Not really. I've got the promotional plan in place that I can get in place, it's too late to turn any more deals although we did pull one forward a week early. You have to look at the information you've got at hand to avoid a knee-jerk. It's very easy to say we actually hit, in the last week of December, we hit 350,000/400,000 units more than we thought we would so we've significantly overachieved in December. It's unfortunate that's our financial year end and you come into a new year and it's a different financial year and you're supposed to get a flying start and you're not. It's very easy to blame,

"Oh I just got a high stockholding."

The second you do that you create conflict with your logistics team who, for my account, manage our stockholding. So they'll tell us, say,

"Well hang on, don't blame us, you know, we have got the same day's stockholding coming out in 2007 as we had coming out 2006, we've ticked our box in terms of number placed stockholding so don't pin this on us".

Um, so you have to be really careful how you manage the argument because effectively the argument is stockholding. Yes you've come out of the, the period one and half day's stockholding but we did half a million cases more in the previous week than we did in the last year and the one and half week's stocking on half a million units whereas it's one and half week's stockholding on a million units is actually about half a million cases. That's the gap we've got between what we thought we'd deliver and what we actually deliver.

Had we come out with exactly the same physical stockholding as we did at the end of 2006 we wouldn't have this issue. Now in actual fact you then look into it in more detail and say well my account has placed emergency orders when everyone was on

holiday in the last week of January, now the stock supply is from another product because they placed 350-400,000 units of emergency orders that we weren't expecting in the last week. It's not supply chain's fault, they couldn't have foreseen it, it's not our fault, and we couldn't have foreseen it so you are where you are.

So it's five or six different, five or six different functions and there's only one way to, to deal with that and that is purely, that's the way that I try and deal with it maybe because of my background in research and also marketing and category management and trade marketing, but I try and deal with conflict with facts. So the way I ended up dealing with this is saying right this is a fact, we have that much volume in December 06 and that much in 07. One point five weeks with no stockholding 06 it equals that volume, one point five weeks no stockholding 07 equals that volume. There's a gap. Let's look at EPOS sales out which we get from my account on a weekly basis. Look we are pretty much flat on sales out in 08 versus 07, so big tick. There's no problem with our brand health. We're selling out and we're selling out at roughly the same levels, on roughly the same strength of the commercial calendar but we're not selling in. If your sales out are flat then you've not got a problem with sales out. If your sales in are down then purely and simply they can only be selling out stockholding. So that's our problem. But we know it's nothing that anybody did specifically, it's just happened and when you start getting that message across it's fine, it's no issue. Now the nature of our business is, okay there's an issue.

... And you've now got half a million case gap to fill so that's the next thing I do. Is I have to then go to my customer to say,

"Do you know what? We've got a problem."

They'll say,

"No we haven't, the sales out are fine thank you very much"

I say,

"Well I've got a problem and I need your help."

And then I have to start looking at what levers I can pull within my promotional calendar because we've got to hit quarter one. We absolutely, fundamentally must hit

quarter one volume profit. start playing around with that promotional plan excepting that my account's financial year ends is around about the end of February, beginning of March we don't want to bring any strong deals in because that will effect our 07/08 business plan so I've got to try and see what can I do in March to pull as much revenue as possible to make sure that I hit my quarter one numbers at no detriment to my account, which effectively means I've got to find half a million cases I hadn't budgeted for, in March.

... I guess I took my role of that was we've got an issue but I have to ((pause)) – I'm going to create a word – de-issue the issue, yeah you know what is the problem. To the logistics guys don't worry, all we're doing is trying to explain what's happened to the people above, there's no concern. To my bosses this is the issue, this is why it's happened. To his bosses this is the issue, this is why it's happened but here's the things I've already put in place to get that volume back so that you've confidence that we've not suddenly missed half a million cases from our four year target because I'm putting that volume back in so I'm still confident I'm within my budget therefore you can be confident that I'm going to hit my budget and you've not got a volume issue..."

Source: Compiled by author 07/02/2008

Incident 112, -ve Outcome – Dean, Company G

Here the key account manager, Dean (company G) describes a situation where a pricing issue with a customer over payment terms led to a number of internal issues. Here the key account manager describes the frustrating situation and the resulting competitive behaviours which resulted in a perceived negative outcome:

"... well there was one actually which just happened where, pricing and payment terms are, are a big topic here... or within, um my company which has, you know, very aggressive pricing and payment terms, you know, which is fine. Um they're also, you know they, and they very much adhere to what those payment terms are. Um there might be a case where other vendors may, you know, kind of let a day or two go for example, you know slip by but my company is not one of those. And eh I have a customer which is probably the market leader in, in it's market and we actually are

changing them to 2% 17 and typically their average terms are anywhere between 2% 45 and 60 and we want them on, 2% 17. And there was a conflict that came up where, um, my company is adamant, you know, that you have pay within those, within those 17 days...

YES.

...and my account actually did something, which was not malicious, whatsoever, it was kind of with the right, with, with the, with the right intent. They actually changed it, you know and, and technically the terms are 2% 17 you know of net 30 or so.

YES.

And that's my kind of, you know, their accounting department jerry rigged their system such that basically the system would see it as 2% 17 net 17 meaning, you know, they're trying to give their system, you know, no, no out if you will. And um unfortunately they, they, they, they did not communicate that, to us.

And we had our accounting people and they were, you know, flipping out.

SO HOW, HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THAT SITUATION?

Um, I, I tried to get ahead of them, you know, and just try, I mean certainly, you know they, they have a good role in the company um, and I tried to provide them or, you know really kind of um, you know make sure that, you know we're... I, I, it's, but you see, you know sometimes the challenges, you know as much as possible I try to get ahead of it.

Well I mean basically what happened is I mean and this is probably, you know, once again a kind of a, a learning curve but um we had a conference call with my customer and with our, um, our accounting people and our accounting people basically told the Director of, of accounts payable, you know, probably, no less than six times but they were just floored and could not understand why my account would change, you know,

And I saw conflict in that in the sense that, you know certainly it was a mess in terms of, that it was not really communicated but I, I also interpret that is that you know I don't see that that's, that's all my customer's fault. I say, you know, my company,

including myself, probably could have done a better job and just saying,

“Alright, you know, you know if it’s that important to get that second day right you know then we need to be a little bit more proactive.”

Um but I also see kind of the big picture that you know here we are trying to get them down to these payment terms and here we are trying to make sure that my customer pays on time, which to me is the big picture.

YES.

And that’s where my customer was trying to get to and it was just kind of, it was a little frustrating is that, I mean overall that’s the big picture and that maybe that’s what we should we talking about, you know, upfront. But that’s not how it was not communicated; you know on this conference call, it was I can’t believe you did this. I am, I was just floored, and you know, I mean some, some pretty strong language.

You know actually I didn’t give the my customer credit and she is a Director so I mean that’s kind of, I mean, we’re kind of, you know she’s, in a sense we’re kind of biting the hand that’s going to ((laughingly)) feeds us. I mean she’s a very critical person and a very critical ally, but she actually handled it actually very well. She’s like alright, you know, our system we, we entered this, your system says this, you know, eh, what would you like us to do?

...I would say definitely could have been handled better.

Well I, I, I think, you know um, um if, if, if, if I had of, you know and this is kind of a, you know I, I didn’t realise you know um, how important like that second date is and it’s, it’s more of a process that they need to get, so they can set up tables and so forth. And I think obviously if that was initially then that could easily have been communicated up front or, you know that could have been a, a focus point.

OK.

And obviously it’s just the fact that, you know my customer, you think that they’re, they’re doing the right thing and changed it and didn’t tell us um, you know it, it definitely inflamed the issue, which, was un--, unfortunate. It was, it was, it was

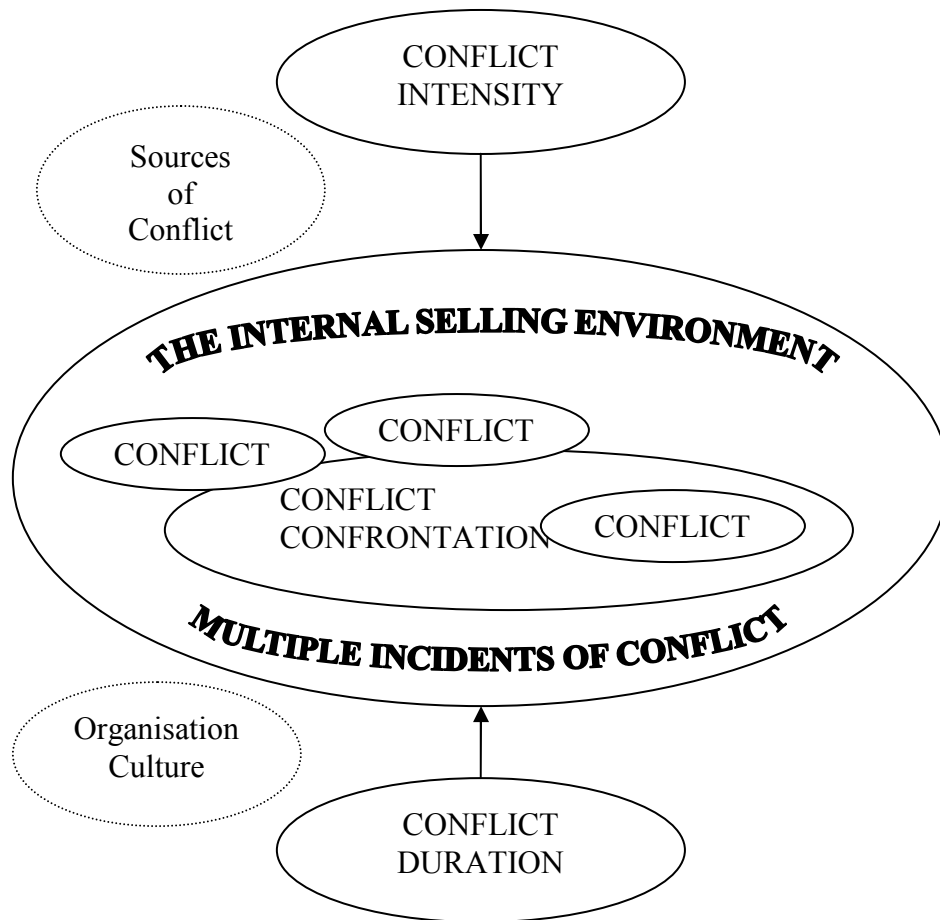
frustrating ‘because you know, in some of these cases I’m, I’m the middle person. And while my company, you know pays my cheque, I mean it’s my job, you know just to, I want this to work for all parties and certainly I know who signs my cheque...”

Source: Compiled by author 13/03/2008

Appendix H-1

CODING MEMO 3 – The Frequency and Abundance of Conflict

The key theme of the research which puts the CIT interview data into context is the perception of the abundance of conflict as perceived by the key account managers involved. This explores the frequency of conflicts encountered, the duration and intensity of these conflicts and the participant’s perception of conflict in general, as a series of isolated incidents or a constant feature of organisational life.



Cluster diagram:

The Abundance of Conflict

Conflict within the organisation is a **regular occurrence** for all the participants; without hesitation, 27 of the participants suggested that they would be handling **any number** of conflicts within their organisations at any one time. **Intra-organisational conflict** is a **constant feature** of organisational life when taken from the viewpoint of

key account managers reflecting on the intra-organisational dimension of their selling role. **Conflict** within the organisation is viewed as an unnecessary barrier to achieving **customer goals** and **sales targets** and is perceived to originate from any number of **sources** within the organisation. (Presented in Chapter 5) Given the extensive relationships the key account manager has within the organisation there is always an **issue** which needs to be resolved.

The perception of **constantly dealing** with **more than one incident of conflict** is closely linked to the perception of the conflict **intensity and duration**. Without exception all key account managers interviewed took time to consider their answers and after reflection went on to describe what conflict as opposed to a minor dispute is. While dealing with multiple conflicts at the same time, these conflicts differ in importance. Key account managers **prioritise** and deal with what they perceive to be the important issues, the most intense conflicts. The priority seems to be set around the **degree of frustration** associated with the conflict rather than any key **business driver**. After this reflection the participants thought in depth about conflict and maintained the position that **conflict incidents do not occur in isolation**. Having stated that conflicts do not occur in isolation, five participants then went on to say they felt conflict was not an **inherent condition**; these key account managers were split across two organisations. The remaining 24 saw conflict as an inherent condition of organisational life. Investigating the theme '**abundance of conflict**' sets the scene for a detailed exploration of the conflict management behaviours used and any links to the categories identified in this theme. When it comes to the initial perceptions of the conflicts encountered, they are frequent, and of differing intensity and duration. Conflict is seen as something which is constantly present and therefore an inherent condition of organisational life.

(From memo writing while coding, the cluster diagram was used to show the emerging categories. It is these cluster diagrams which led to the expansion of the diagrammatic representation of the themes.

Source: Compiled by author 16/06/2008

Appendix H-2

QSR NVivo 8.0 Tree Node Summary: The Frequency of Conflict

Tree Nodes

| Name |
|-------------------------|
| Organisational Conflict |
| Conflict Management |
| The Nature of Conflict |
| The Conflict Paradigm |
| Frequency of Conflict |
| All the Time |
| Many |
| more than one NUMBERS |
| Loads |
| Multiple |
| Infrequent |
| Regular occurrence |
| Duration |
| Intensity |
| Quick |
| Length of episodes |
| Long |
| Short |
| Importance |
| Significance |
| Major |
| Minor |
| Presence |
| Infrequent |
| All the time |
| Inherent |
| Always there |
| Multiplicity |
| Conglomerated Conflicts |
| Many |
| All at once |
| Same time |
| Time Temporal |
| Everpresent |

Appendix I

Summary of the Frequency and Abundance of Conflict

| | Key Account Manager | How many conflict episodes have you had to handle at any one time? | Is conflict something you are constantly dealing with or just the occasional incident? | Handles Multiple Conflict at the Same Times | Views Conflict as a Permanent Feature of the Organisation |
|---|---------------------|--|---|---|---|
| 1 | Stuart | "I've lost count, probably, loads probably. Um in terms of conflicts I've probably had six or seven in one go ..." | "in the natural environment that we're in, which is a sales environment, inevitably there will be conflict ..." | YES | YES |
| 2 | Gerald | "Oh, er, I guess you can handle ten little things all.. that will be going on all at the same time. In terms of fairly significant major things probably the worst it's got it probably three or four things all going spinning what can appear to be out of control at any one time." | "Internal conflict is something that I would say that I'm pretty constantly trying to deal with." | YES | YES |
| 3 | Neil | "Oh I've got four or five at one time." | "I think you are but again it's, it's recognising what is, what is, what is conflict." | YES | YES |
| 4 | Dirk | "I would say probably um three or four, maybe half a dozen." | "I would say constantly dealing with." | YES | YES |
| 5 | Jonathan | "Oh you could probably have five or ((laughingly)) six going on at one time I would say." | "... within the organisation I, I think that, I think it's ongoing." | YES | YES |
| 6 | Paul | "As an average, um, certainly without... I could have a difference of opinion with production, I could have a difference of opinion with my customer, I could have a difference of opinion with credit control, err, probably three. Three." | "I suppose you just get immune to it as confrontation. You just think of it as an ongoing part of your job. But if when you actually break it down to that then, yes, then it would be an ongoing conflict or negotiation." | YES | YES |
| 7 | David | "...there may be three or four things going on at any one... conflict, potential conflict scenarios at any one time." | "I think it's something that we continually deal with." | YES | YES |
| 8 | Stephen | "Um at any one time there's maybe half a dozen conflict things running..." | "Um, I would say true conflict comes across from time to time. I think stuff you deal with on an ongoing basis are disagreements, um or minor confrontations. Um, true conflict, in my view, is something that um happens infrequently." | YES | NO |

| | | | | | |
|----|---------|--|--|-----|-----|
| 9 | Carl | "Um so eh I'm not sure I'm answering your question. I couldn't put a number on it if I'm honest but I wouldn't be surprised if I really gave it a lot of thought that there is probably quite a lot of times where there's quite a layer of conflict going on..." | "...ongoing. Very ongoing." | YES | YES |
| 10 | Peter | "I think probably no more than two at a time, um that I've been directly involved in. Um yeah and two, two or three would probably be maximum." | "...you get probably less frequent, smaller day to day stuff um but you would get every now and then something big..." | YES | NO |
| 11 | Kevin | "I think because I'm finding it difficult to give you examples of conflicts in the first instance, to be able to answer that question is almost impossible to be honest." | "Eh I'd say an isolated occasional incident, definitely..." | NO | NO |
| 12 | Albert | "I mean you, you could have half a dozen at any one time." | "Well even in what I've just said half a dozen, I would still call them isolated incidents as opposed to total conflict." | YES | YES |
| 13 | Wendy | "...you can have five or six a day of those going on at one time, you know, if it's a particularly ((laughingly)) bad day." | "I think on a, I'd say constantly dealing with to be honest, eh I think, you know, in any sales role you are because sometimes that's your job, it's almost your job to manage everybody in, in the whole picture and that can be quite difficult sometimes. " | YES | YES |
| 14 | Carlos | "...once a week we'd have two or three conflicts going on at any one time, easy." | "Constantly dealing with." | YES | YES |
| 15 | Frank | "...probably yeah and you could have a product issue, you've got a technical issue, you've got to have eh planning issue, you could have a buying issue, you could have a merchandising issue, conflict with the merchandiser, conflict with the trading assistant, conflict within the supplier, eh..." | "...day to day small barriers can come all the time." | YES | YES |
| 16 | William | "Oh at least a dozen. It's difficult to, to say exactly but at least a dozen, depending on what's happening at the time." | "Whilst it happens once a day an awful lot else happens during the day as well so for me it's an occasional incident and yet the frequency's there. Does that make sense?" | YES | YES |
| 17 | James | <i>Didn't give a specific answer</i> | <i>Didn't give a specific answer</i> | YES | YES |
| 18 | Anna | "Oh, okay. ((pause for thought)) Um you could get quite a lot in one day and all at once..." | "...((pause for thought)) Conflict is something that you constantly deal with." | YES | YES |

| | | | | | |
|----|---------|--|---|-----|-----------|
| 19 | Vincent | "Um ((pause for thought)) the truth of it is you, you ha--, you're handling multiple conflicts all the time as a national account manager." | "Constantly." | YES | YES |
| 20 | Jane | "Phew, multiple. Um so for example I could have a finance query, a marketing, questioning your plan and I could have a um, the Trade Strategy um asking me about a return investment for a promotion and I could have, I don't know, someone else just wanting to bug me in a day. " | "Constantly dealing with." | YES | YES |
| 21 | Larry | "Oh um ((pause for thought)) potentially you're handling two or three conflicts at a time..." | "There could be constant conflict within an account because of the relationship or even internally because of a relationship that needs to be dealt with" | YES | YES |
| 22 | Robert | "Um, like a piece of string so, um, could be, could be any. Could be, you know, could be ten in a day." | "...on a daily basis, yeah, definitely." | YES | YES |
| 23 | Cliff | "...you feel as though you've got <u>lots</u> of areas of conflict." | "I think potential conflict is always there..." | YES | YES |
| 24 | Kenny | "...the average is probably two or three going on at any one point in time." | "No it's constant but it's constant in terms of there's always something changing. It's, it's the nature of something changes and that change and therefore by convention it's a conflict to what the plan was. It's constant, but it's also what makes the job interesting." | YES | YES |
| 25 | Joseph | "I'd probably say maybe one or two. I wouldn't say it's a lot more than two." | "I, I think it's an occasional inci--, incident but it happens regularly ((laughingly)) in top selling roles." | YES | YES |
| 26 | Rose | "Oh, um, I would say that I've never handled more than one or two at, at any given time." | "For me it's an occasional incident." | YES | NO |
| 27 | Ruben | "If I, if I just use the example of this morning I've already, I've already handled two conflicts this morning... I mean it could be one or it could be ten..." | "I think it really depends on the perspective of the person... I have a number of things sitting in my inbox right now that are conflicts." | YES | YES |
| 28 | Max | "Wow that's a tough one. Eh, you know, maybe three or four..." | "Um you know it's, for, for me right now it's, it's very occasional." | YES | NO |
| 29 | Dean | "You know... Three..." | "Um I, I, I would say, I would say it's, it's pretty common...Um I would, I would say um probably pretty frequent." | YES | YES |

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