

# Key account management: the inside selling job

James I.F. Speakman

IESEG Business School, Lille, France, and

Lynette Ryals

School of Management, Cranfield University, Cranfield, UK

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Salespeople are frequently required to manage a wide range of complex internal relationships. This paper seeks to explore one aspect of the key account manager's internal selling role which has not been addressed before, specifically how the key account manager handles multiple incidents of simultaneous conflict while carrying out their internal selling duties.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research uses the critical incident technique together with an interpretive framework for data coding in order to explore the complex behavioural sequences adopted by key account managers while managing the many incidents of conflict which they frequently encounter within the organisation. Twenty-nine key account managers from seven participating FMCG, Blue Chip organisations in the UK and USA participated in the research describing 112 incidents of conflict.

**Findings** – The research provides further insight into the complexity perspective of conflict management, suggesting that conflict episodes do not occur as discrete, isolated, incidents, rather incidents occur simultaneously requiring a combination of behaviours in their management.

**Practical implications** – 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.

**Originality/value** – 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.

**Keywords** Conflict, Conflict management, Key account management, Internal selling, Selling, Sales management, Managers, Role conflict

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

For both academics and practitioners research that explains and predicts key account manager performance has for a long time been at the centre of their attention and has become a requirement for sufficiently understanding the sales process (Sheth, 1976). However research into personal selling is limited and has primarily dealt with the key account manager's external relationships, with buyers and the customer purchasing network (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Krapfel *et al.*, 1991; Weitz, 1978), while another stream of research considering the internal role of the key account manager has focused on the salesperson, sales manager relationships reflecting issues related to key account manager motivation and performance (Ford and Walker, 1975; Pettijohn *et al.*, 2002). More recent research in the US has considered another internal dimension of the key account manager's selling role; the way in which they navigate through the numerous, complex, intra-organizational relationships and how affects their performance (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007). In contrast this research investigates conflict and the key account manager's internal selling role and the complex behavioural sequences key account managers adopt in the management of any intra-organizational, interpersonal conflicts encountered.

The inside selling role, requires the key account manager to represent the customer's 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 the key account manager is 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. These conflicts have to be managed in the best interests of the key account manager's organization while also attempting to meet the customer's needs thus maintaining the external perception of customer orientation (Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002). It is therefore very important that key account managers are able to understand the nature of any conflict they encounter and recognize the behaviours and strategies for of handling conflict in order to gain the best possible outcome (Bradford *et al.*, 2004; Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

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 tend to treat conflict as a discrete, isolated events occurring in an otherwise co-operative 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 in the alternative paradigm, as an inherent condition of social interaction (Pondy, 1992). It aims to explore the notion that conflict episodes do not occur in isolation, that certain conflict management behaviours will

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at [www.emeraldinsight.com/0885-8624.htm](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0885-8624.htm)



Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing  
27/5 (2012) 360–369  
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 0885-8624]  
[DOI 10.1108/08858621211236034]

only be appropriate in certain situations and that the situation may change with any 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 manager are able to adapt and use a combination of management behaviours which can be modified throughout and across conflict episodes.

## 2. Key account management and the internal selling role

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 being referred to as key account management (Millman and Wilson, 1995). 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 their supplier or smaller and may exist as more than one customer or only one critical customer. They do however all exhibit a willingness to establish long term relationships with their suppliers requiring the supplier to consider them of considerable 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 both within the customer and supplier organizations. For the purpose of this research the key account manager is defined as the sales manager who is responsible for speaking to large complex strategically important customers in one voice representing the full capabilities of their organization (Napolitano, 1997).

Developing and managing these long term relationships is considered to be a key component of a key account managers success in the modern organization where interpersonal contacts can vary widely (Leigh and Marshall, 2001). Moreover, key account managers are becoming increasingly more involved with 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 business objectives and they are therefore able to provide service solutions in line with their tactical and strategic goals (Bradford *et al.*, 2004). In order to continually meet the customer's needs the key account manager needs to influence a wide variety of 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 organization and the customer fall under the term boundary spanning (Battencourt *et al.*, 2005). The boundary spanner takes up a position at the periphery of the organization 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 organization and the customer. When carrying out the internal selling role, the key account manager is likely to encounter a wide range of conflict episodes and needs to effectively resolve these conflicts 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.

## 3. Intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict

Conflict is a potential consequence of all interdependent relationships, arising from the 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 co-operating parties working towards similar objectives or between disputants aiming to achieve opposing objectives. Whatever the source of the conflict, in order to get the best mutual advantage, it is vital that those involved possess the necessary skills to understand and manage any conflict to ensure mitigation and the optimum outcome. It is intra-organizational, interpersonal conflict, which is considered in this study, specifically the conflicts that the key account manager experiences when dealing internally, within their organization, with other individuals or groups while carrying out the internal selling role.

Conflict has been defined in a number of ways, as a reaction of the individual 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). These definitions are reliant upon the premise that an opposition or incompatibility is recognized by both parties, that an interaction is taking place and that there is some degree of interdependence.

Within groups or organizations, 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). Conflict in the organizational context or organizational conflict refers to the situations which arise when two or more people working within the same organization 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). This form of conflict is generally viewed negatively, being seen as highly adversarial (Ford and Walker, 1975) and can exist between two individuals or multi party, between an individual and another individual representing a group.

### Conflict management behaviours

Conflict management can be defined as the actions a person typically engages in, in response to the perceived interpersonal conflict in order to achieve a desired goal (Thomas, 1976), the way in which conflict episodes are addressed. Research has considered three different approaches; The "one-best-

way” perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984), the contingency or situational perspective (Munduate *et al.*, 1999; Nicotera, 1993; Thomas, 1992) and the complexity or conglomerated perspective (Euwema *et al.*, 2003; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999).

It has been suggested that individuals have a behavioural predisposition to the way in which they handle conflict and that the manner in which individuals handle conflict remains consistent across conflict episodes (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). This “one best way” perspective takes the approach that any one conflict management style, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing or collaborating will be more effective than another. (Blake and Mouton, 1970; Thomas, 1976, and Sternberg and Soriano, 1984) From this perspective the most constructive solution is considered to be collaborating or problem solving since it is always positively interdependent having a joint best outcome. In contrast when a more aggressive, competitive, negatively interdependent approach is taken the results tend to be perceived more negatively (Janssen *et al.*, 1999).

In contrast the contingency perspective maintains that any one conflict management behaviour can only be effective in any one given situation, what is appropriate in one situation will not be appropriate in another (Thomas, 1992). The problem with the “one best way” and contingency perspectives is their failure to deal with the fact that individuals can frequently change their behaviour across and during conflict episodes (Medina *et al.*, 2004; Munduate *et al.*, 1999; Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). Moving beyond the traditional two dimensions of Blake and Mouton’s (1964) management grid, the complexity or conglomerated perspective of conflict management, 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 are considered to be the rule rather than the exception (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1997). Complex conflict management studies to date have adopted one of four different complexity perspectives: The first looking at simultaneous complexity and how the interdependent modes of conflict management style are used to affect the outcome of the conflict (Munduate *et al.*, 1999). That is the investigating the different combinations of behaviours used and the resulting outcome. Secondly, the behavioural phases through which the participants of a conflict episode pass or temporal complexity, looking at the point at which behavioural style is changed and the effect on the conflict episode (Olekalns *et al.*, 1996). Third, the sequential complexity or conglomerated perspective concerned with the different modes of conflict management behaviour, how they are combined and at what point they change during the interaction (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). In their study of conglomerated conflict management behaviour, Euwema *et al.* (2003) argue that the traditional approach under represents the individual’s assertive modes of behaviour and have as a result added confronting and process controlling to the traditional five behaviours in the management grid giving seven possible behaviours. Two types of sequential pattern, reciprocity, responding to the other party with the same behaviour and complementarity, responding with an opposing

behaviour have been considered with the effectiveness of complementarity or reciprocity behaviours being dependent upon the situation, the micro-environment of the conflict episode and types of conflict present (Munduate *et al.*, 1999). Finally the sequential, contingency perspective suggests that conflict is a constant and inherent condition social interaction; that conflict episodes do not occur as discrete isolated incidents, that the effectiveness of the conflict management behaviours is contingent upon and moderated by the actors’ perception of the conflicts encountered, the characteristics and relationships and any learning experiences from any previously managed incidents of conflict (Speakman and Ryals, 2010). This research explores the key account managers internal selling role taking Pondy’s, 1992 alternative viewpoint as a new paradigm for conflict within the organizations and investigates the sequential, contingency perspective of conflict management theory.

#### 4. Research method

This research takes an approach, which is ethnographic in design and guided by the grounded theory method as proposed by Strauss and Corbin in, 1994. In this research approach, theory is grounded in the key account manager’s accounts of internal any conflict situation and is therefore closely related to the realities of their actual daily routines. This research required multiple data sets from different organizations in order to investigate the influencing variables and allow for more generalization. The unit of analysis is the actual conflict episode as experienced by the key account manager.

The study was carried out using the critical incident technique (CIT – Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Flanagan, 1954), as the data collection method, describing the naturally occurring behaviours the key account manager adopts when handling intra-organizational, interpersonal conflicts, while carrying out their internal selling role. CIT is a well-established method; there are over 140 studies using the critical incident technique published in the marketing literature (Gremier, 2003), and it has previously been used in the study of interpersonal conflict resolution (McGrane *et al.*, 2005) and in the study of disputes resolution (Metts *et al.*, 1991). Moreover Talarico (2002) takes a similar interpretive approach in exploring coaching and management. This method is therefore ideally suited to the study of intra-organizational, interpersonal conflicts in the key account management context, although it is new to this domain.

Despite many variations in procedures for gathering and analyzing 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). 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 (Bitner *et al.*, 1994; Flanagan, 1954). 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 organizations in specific situations (Flanagan, 1954). The use of the CIT in this context avoids the participants expressing stereotype opinions about management, individuals, working procedures and processes but allows for the assessment of organizational performance through analyzing the participant's accounts of skills and behaviours used to manage a specific incident or situation (Bitner *et al.*, 1994).

The organizations studied in this research were chosen because of their fit to the selection criteria as “Blue Chip” fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) organizations in the food, drink and consumer goods market supplying major UK and US grocery multiple, wholesale and convenience retailers. For this research 29 key account managers across seven international organizations within the FMCG retail supply industry agreed to take part.

The research was conducted retrospectively using open/semi-structured interviews to collect the data. Rich subjective accounts of internal conflicts (“critical incidents”) were gathered through open/semi-structured interviews. The respondents made their own judgments on what constitutes internal conflict and what the consequences were. In order to fit with the critical incident technique each respondent was asked to recollect, in their own words, two types of incidents, those, which were effectively resolved or mitigated, and those, which were ineffectively resolved or agitated. Through open questions 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 analyzed using an open coding method.

### Data analysis

The data analysis is a style of open, axial and selective coding under the categories or themes which were established through a review of the literature, the analysis being based upon aspects of organizational conflict theory as opposed to true emergent coding (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 and the free nodes categorized into related groups considering the research question and the themes under investigation that is; the nature of conflict, conflict management behaviours and the frequency or abundance of conflict. Revisions were made as necessary, and the categories tightened up to the point that maximizes mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness (Spiggle, 1994; Webber, 1990). In this way the data analysis moves beyond simple word counting, making the technique particularly rich and meaningful but reliant upon the coding and categorizing of the data (Spiggle, 1994).

When used properly and following Flanagan's (1954) methods, 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 cautious and precise, dealing with less common important incidents while providing of 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.

## 5. Research findings

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 their customers' demands and ultimately achieving their sales objectives. In addition this research demonstrates the extent to which conflicts are experienced by the key account manager and 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. Moreover, this research expands the conglomerated complexity perspective of conflict management (Janssen *et al.*, 1999) within the organization and how it is managed, empirically establishing the sequential complexity theory (Speakman and Ryals, 2010) which takes into account the occurrence of multiple simultaneous incidents of conflict and the moderating factors influencing behavioural choice within the micro-environment.

### Conflict management: a KAM perspective

When considering the best behaviour to adopt in any situation, the key account manager considers all of the options available and what the best possible outcome might be, (with the exception of the pursuit of self interest where the only perceived outcome is an outcome predetermined by the key account manager). This research shows that key account managers were constantly dealing with some form of conflict within the organization, some perceived to be more important than others and 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 their experience of previous conflict situations providing a learning opportunity for the key account manager and subsequently increasing their conflict management skills.

Here the findings concerning 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 are presented.

### 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.

This research validates this position, suggesting that the participating key account managers initially 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. Moreover 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. This 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 a 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 or to have agitated the conflict situation. In this respect Therefore, this research challenges the “one best way” perspective suggesting that in certain 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. The “one best way” approach suggests that a more aggressive, competitive, negatively interdependent approaches (in fact, any conflict management approach other than collaborative) results in suboptimal outcomes (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). This research however shows 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 this 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 January 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.

This 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, this research also makes some challenges to 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 which were perceived to be affective relating to people, goals and roles, here 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 October 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. Therefore this 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 and did not 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 very recently, 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). This research goes on to show that for the participating key account managers working within their organizations 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 organizations 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, 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.

In recent research taking this complexity perspective it has been 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 characterizes conflict within the organization 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). This 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 both a positive and negative outcome.

#### 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.

This 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 I). Most importantly, this 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 change in outcome. Using a combination of competing and collaborating reversed the perceived negative outcome 50 per cent of the time. Van de Vliert *et al.* (1999), however, did not consider other behavioural combinations and the potential outcome. In total this study revealed eight combinations of behaviour (excluding mediation) with more of the combinations having a negative outcome than positive;

these are summarized in Table I. This suggests the key account managers try a combination of behaviours as a potential "turn around" strategy when they feel they are not going to achieve their desired objective.

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 behaviour is combined with accommodating it changes the perceived outcome. However, in this research, competing was perceived to be the right complementary behaviour validating the previous research by Van de Vliert *et al.* (1999).

In contrast one other combination of behaviours, avoidance and accommodation had a largely negative outcome. Here the key account managers described incidents over which they had little influence and therefore not chose to collaborate and tended to 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, this 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. Moreover this research extends the conglomerated complexity perspective and provides empirical evidence in support of a new sequential contingency perspective (Speakman, 2009; Speakman and Ryals, 2010).

## 6. Conclusions: the sequential contingency perspective

Through exploring the complexity of conflict management within the organisation this research extends the previous adaptive selling (Weitz, 1981) research into the internal selling situation, showing that the key account managers demonstrated adaptive behaviour within their organization in the management of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, from the salespersons' external, customer perspective the challenge is to recognize and manage conflict when it arises with the centre of attention being on maintaining long term relationships (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). This research extends this theoretical perspective showing that the same practice is applied to their internal relationships which also have to be maintained in order to continually meet the customers' demands. 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 cannot or will not adapt. 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 practicing adaptive selling, the altering of sales behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature

Table I Summary of described multiple conflict management behaviours

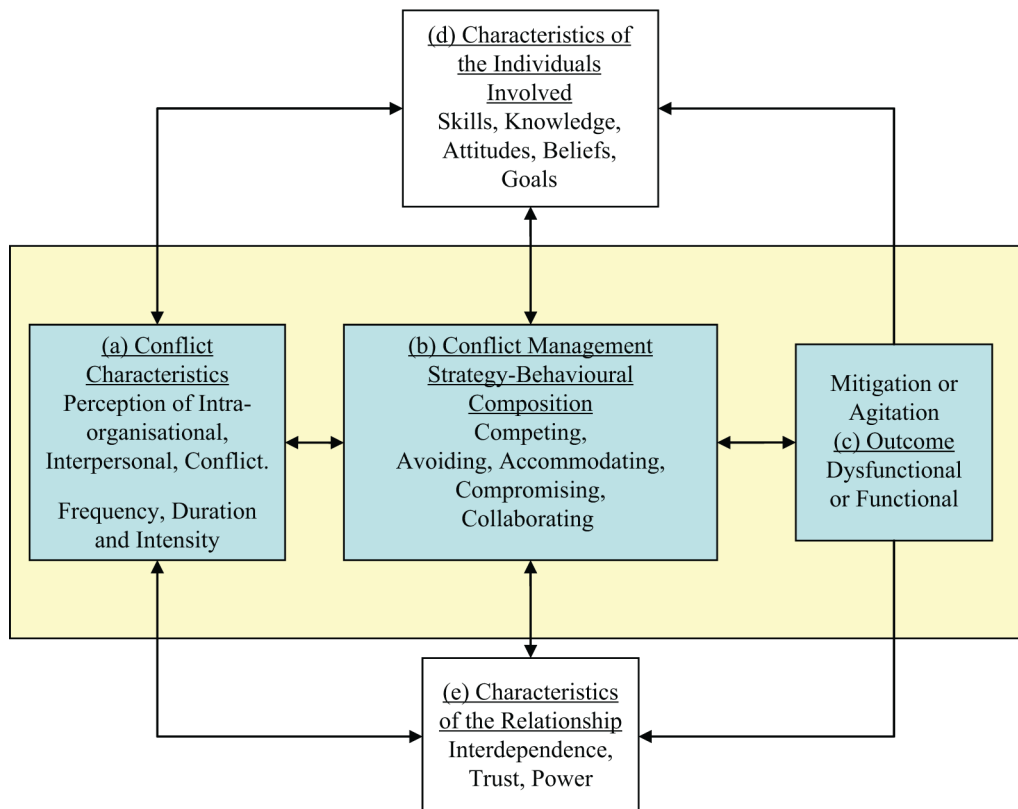
Combination of behaviours used	No. of respondents referencing	No. of + ve incidents referencing	No. of – ve incidents referencing
Collaborating and avoiding	1	0	2
Collaborating and competing	12	8	7
Competing and avoiding	2	0	2
Competing and accommodating	1	1	1
Collaborating and accommodating	4	2	2
Collaborating and compromising	1	1	0
Avoiding and Accommodating	6	1	6
Competing and avoiding	1	0	1
Totals	29	14	19

Notes: Total number of respondents referring to multiple behaviours in the management of specific incidents 22 (some described more than one set of multiple behaviours)

of the selling situation. 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 organization. In considering conflict as an inherent condition of organizational life (Van de Vliert *et al.*, 1999) a fourth complexity perspective is supported – the sequential contingency perspective for the management of multiple, simultaneous conflicts (Speakman and Ryals, 2010), adapted from the contingency framework for adaptive selling behaviour (Weitz, 1981), this is presented here in Figure 1.

The basic elements of the framework are (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’ perception of any intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict together with 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

Figure 1 KAM: a sequential contingency model for intra-organisational, interpersonal conflict management



issue may be agitated in which case the key account manager 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 whereby the 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.

The basic postulate of the model is that conflict is a constant and inherent condition of key account management interaction within the organization; that conflict episodes do not occur as discrete isolated incidents, that the effectiveness of the conflict management behaviours is contingent upon and moderated by the key account manager's perception of the conflict, the characteristics and relationships of the key account managers involved and any learning experiences gained from any previously managed incidents of conflict. In addition to the elements explored in this research, the model also proposes two other elements for future research 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.

This research therefore makes six significant and original contributions to knowledge in the fields of both key account management and conflict management theory both theoretically and methodologically, which are summarised as follows:

- Establishing that conflict episodes are a constant and inherent feature of the key account manager's organisational life as opposed to a series discrete isolated incidents thus supporting Pondy's (1992) alternative viewpoint.
- Establishing that conflict episodes within the organization do not always occur in isolation that the key account manager experiences and manages multiple incidents of conflict at the same time.
- Establishing an understanding of the key account management perspective on the behavioural choices available when managing conflict within the organization and the impact these simultaneous incidents of conflict have on the internal selling role.
- Extending the complexity perspective for the management of conflict within the organization, 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 supporting the sequential contingency perspective.
- Extending the use of the critical incident technique within marketing to a study of the effectiveness of conflict management behaviours within the organization from a key account management perspective.
- 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 organization.

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 organization 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.

## References

- Battencourt, L., Brown, S. and MacKenzie, S. (2005), "Customer-oriented boundary spanning behaviours: test of a social exchange model of antecedents", *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 81 No. 2, pp. 141-57.
- Bitner, M., Brooms, B. and Mohr, L. (1994), "Critical service encounters: the employee's viewpoint", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58 No. 4, pp. 95-107.
- Bitner, M., Brooms, B. and Tetreault, M. (1990), "The service encounter: diagnosing favorable and unfavorable", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54 No. 1, pp. 71-84.
- Blake, R. and Mouton, J.S. (1964), *The Managerial Grid: Key Orientations for Achieving Production through People*, Gulf Publishing Company, Houston, TX.
- Blake, R. and Mouton, J. (1970), *The Grid for Sales Excellence*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Bradford, K., Stringfellow, A. and Weitz, B. (2004), "Managing conflict to improve the effectiveness of retail networks", *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 80 No. 3, pp. 181-95.
- Deutsch, M. (1973), *The Resolution of Conflict*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Dwyer, R., Schurr, P. and Sejo, O. (1987), "Developing buyer-seller relationships", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51 No. 2, pp. 11-28.
- Edvardsson, B. (1992), "Service breakdowns: a study of critical incidents in an airline", *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 3 No. 4, pp. 17-29.
- Euwema, M., Van de Vliert, E. and Bakker, A. (2003), "Substantive and relational effectiveness of organisational conflict behavior", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 119-39.
- Flanagan, J. (1954), "The critical incident technique", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 51 No. 4, pp. 327-58.
- Ford, N. and Walker, O. Jr (1975), "Expectation specific measures of the intersender conflict and role ambiguity experienced by salesmen", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 95-112.
- Greenberg, J. and Baron, R. (1993), *Behaviour in Organizations*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA.



- Gremler, D. (2003), "An examination of the use of the critical incident technique in services marketing research", *American Marketing Association Conference Proceedings, Toronto, Ontario*.
- Jameson, J. (1999), "Toward a comprehensive model for the assessment and management of intraorganizational conflict: developing the framework", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 268-94.
- Janssen, O., Van de Vliert, E. and Veenstra, C. (1999), "How task and person conflict shape the role of positive interdependence in management teams", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 25, pp. 117-42.
- Jehn, K. (1995), "A multimethod examination of the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 256-82.
- Jehn, K. and Chatman, J. (2000), "The influence of proportional and perceptual conflict composition on team performance", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 56-73.
- Krapfel, R. Jr, Salmond, D. and Spekman, R. (1991), "A strategic approach to managing buyer-seller relationships", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 25 No. 9, pp. 22-37.
- Lambe, C. and Spekman, R. (1997), "National account management: large account selling or buyer-supplier alliance?", *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 61-74.
- Leigh, T. and Marshall, G. (2001), "Research priorities in sales strategy and performance", *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 83-93.
- McGrane, F., Wilson, J. and Cammock, T. (2005), "Leading employees in one-to-one dispute resolution", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 26 Nos 3/4, pp. 263-80.
- Medina, J., Dorado, M., de Cisneros, I. and Munduate, L. (2004), "Behavioural sequences in the effectiveness of conflict management", *Psychology in Spain*, No. 8, pp. 38-47.
- Metts, S., Sprecher, S. and Cupach, W.R. (1991), "Retrospective self reports", in Montgomery, B.M. and Duck, S. (Eds), *Studying Interpersonal Interaction*, Guildford Press, London, pp. 162-78.
- Millman, T. and Wilson, K. (1995), "From key account selling to key account management", *Journal of Marketing Practice*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 9-21.
- Munduate, L., Ganaza, J., Peiro, J. and Euwema, M. (1999), "Patterns of styles in conflict management and effectiveness", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 5-24.
- Napolitano, L. (1997), "Customer-supplier partnering: a strategy whose time has come", *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 1-8.
- Nicotera, A. (1993), "Beyond two dimensions: a grounded theory model of conflict-handling behavior", *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 6 No. 3, p. 282.
- Olekals, M., Smith, P. and Walsh, T. (1996), "The process of negotiating: strategy and timing as predictors of outcomes", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 68 No. 1, pp. 68-77.
- Pettijohn, C., Pettijohn, L. and Taylor, A. (2002), "The influence of salesperson skill, motivation, and training on the practice of customer-oriented selling", *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 19 No. 9, pp. 743-57.
- Plouffe, C. and Barclay, D. (2007), "Salesperson navigation: the intraorganizational dimension of the sales role", *Industrial Marketing Management*, No. 36, pp. 528-39.
- Pondy, L. (1992), "Historical perspectives and contemporary update: reflections on organizational conflict", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 257-61.
- Putnem, L. and Poole, M. (1987), "Conflict and negotiation", in Jablin, F., Putnam, L., Roberts, K. and Porter, L. (Eds), *Handbook of Organizational Communication*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Sheppard, B. (1992), "Conflict research as schizophrenia: the many faces of organizational conflict", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 325-34.
- Sheth, J. (1976), "Buyer-seller interaction: a conceptual framework", *Advances in Consumer Research*, No. 3, pp. 382-6.
- Speakman, J.I.F. (2009), "An exploration of multiple, simultaneous, conflict episodes and the key account manager's internal selling role", paper presented at International Association of Conflict Management Annual Meeting, Kyoto, June.
- Speakman, J.I.F. and Ryals, L.A. (2010), "A re-evaluation of conflict theory for the management of multiple, simultaneous conflict episodes", *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 186-201.
- Spiggle, S. (1994), "Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 491-503.
- Sternberg, R. and Soriano, L. (1984), "Styles of conflict resolution", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 115-26.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1994), "Grounded theory methodology: an overview", in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 273-85.
- Talarico, M. (2002), "Manager as coach in a pharmacy benefit management organization: a critical incidents analysis", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.
- Tellefsen, T. and Eyuboglu, N. (2002), "The impact of a salesperson's in-house conflicts and influence attempts on buyer commitment", *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 157-70.
- Thomas, K. (1976), "Conflict and conflict management", in Dunnette, M. (Ed.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Rand McNally, Chicago, IL, pp. 889-935.
- Thomas, K.W. (1992), "Conflict and conflict management: reflections and update", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 265-74.
- Van de Vliert, E., Nauta, A., Euwema, M. and Janssen, O. (1997), "The effectiveness of mixing problem solving and forcing", in De Dreu, C. and Van de Vliert, E. (Eds), *Using Conflict in Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 38-52.
- Van de Vliert, E., Nauta, A., Giebels, E. and Janssen, O. (1999), "Constructive conflict at work", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 475-91.

- Webber, R. (1990), *Basic Content Analysis*, 2nd ed., Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Weitz, B. (1978), "Relationship between salesperson performance and understanding of customer decision making", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 501-16.
- Weitz, B. (1981), "Effectiveness in sales interactions: a contingency framework", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 45, pp. 85-103.
- Weitz, B. and Bradford, K. (1999), "Personal selling and sales management: a relationship marketing perspective", *Academy of Marketing Science. Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 241-54.

### **About the authors**

Dr James I.F. Speakman, PhD (Cranfield), MBA, BSc, is currently Associate Professor and head of track: International

Negotiation and Sales Management at IÉSEG Business School, a member of Lille Catholic University, where his attentions are focused on sales and commercial negotiation with other research interests including multi-cultural negotiations and conflict management.

Professor Lynette Ryals, MA (Oxon), MBA, PhD, FSIP, is Professor of Strategic Sales and Account Management at Cranfield School of Management, UK, and Director of the Demand Chain Management Community. She specializes in key account management and marketing portfolio management, particularly in service businesses, and has completed a PhD on customer profitability. She is a Registered Representative of the London Stock Exchange and a Fellow of the Society of Investment Professionals. She is also the Pro Vice Chancellor at Cranfield University School of Management.