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**Long Term Collaborative Business Relationships:
The Impact of Trust and C³ Behaviour**

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Long-term, collaborative business relationships are like marriages where tolerance, forbearance and some reduction of freedom as well as innovation are necessary to ensure success. Trust and co-operative behaviours are known to be essential ingredients in securing an environment of continuous improvement but, how they are correlated has yet to be tested. The paper describes a research project within a sample of long-term monopoly businesses as a novel approach to bringing trust and co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration (C³ Behaviour) into sharper focus without competitive distractions. It was found that a correlation between trust and C³ Behaviour and the success of the collaborative relationship exists.

Introduction

It has been recognised that for successful collaborative relationships to thrive, trust and C³ Behaviour (Co-operation, Co-ordination and Collaboration) are key. Covey (1989) describes a situation where the degrees of trust and co-operative behaviour applied to a business-to-business relationship are directly related to the outcome. This concept would seem to have certain validity but up until now it has not been tested. This paper uses data drawn from a major investigation of long-term collaborative relationships. The relationships are drawn from a substantial sample of highly stable, monopoly businesses within UK Defence Procurement, characterised by long duration (often well over 10 years), where each side wields considerable

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political and economic power but, where a tradition of adversarial dealings, lack of trust and the option to leave often reduces efficiency, increases costs and offers little incentive to co-operate (Humphries and Wilding 2003; Humphries and Wilding 2004; Palmer 2001; Parker and Hartley 1997). Moreover, maintaining close relationships over the long-term supply of highly specialised goods under these conditions has increased the risk of opportunistic behaviour (Hill 1990; Macneil 1980) and further reduced opportunities to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, despite their strategic policy importance. From the researchers point of view this well-established environment is particularly interesting because the variability resulting from competition is removed and within this constrained environment the links between the partner organisations, including the effect of key behavioural variables, are more visible. This paper considers the role of Trust and a combination of Co-operation, Co-ordination and Collaboration (C3 Behaviour) in monopolistic business-to-business relationships. It first examines views from the literature, and then describes a research project which aims to understand the behavioural and business factors that influence relationships between the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) and its main industrial suppliers. It concludes that the degree of trust and C3 behaviour are directly correlated to the success of long-term, collaborative relationships. We assert that this offers an extension to knowledge in the field and offers practitioners useful guidance and academics with several opportunities for further research.

Trust

Trust is a keystone of business-to-business relationships but in an extensive literature it is portrayed as a complex entity, which is not easy to measure (Gulati 1995). There appears to be a consensus that trust integrates micro level psychological processes and group dynamics with macro level institutional arrangements or more simply that it encapsulates dispositions, decisions, behaviours, social networks and institutions (Rousseau et al. 1998). Trust enables co-operative behaviour, promotes improved relationships, reduces harmful conflict and allows effective response in a crisis (Doney and Cannon 1997; Gundlach and Murphy 1993; Kumar 1996; Mohr and Spekman 1994). It can be a psychological state that comprises the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of behaviour of the other party and can thus be a substitute for more formal control methods (Kramer 1999; Moorman et al. 1992). Trust requires risk (a perceived probability of loss) (Cowles 1997; Currall and Inkpen 2000), uncertainty (over the intentions of the other party) (Doney and Cannon 1997), interdependence (where the interests of one party cannot be achieved without reliance on the other) and choice (alternative options are available) as essential conditions (Kumar

1996). Both Economics and Games Theory see trust as a stable phenomenon that either exists or doesn't (Axelrod 1984; Gulati 1995). Others see it as being 'caused' (e.g. by previous good experience, institutional reputation, and commitment) and affecting factors such as openness, reliability and honesty (Goleman 1998). A more general assessment suggests a combination of all these elements in a richer interaction between parties which sometimes requires a leap in faith to achieve but, the result is the creation of a reservoir of goodwill and the incentive to go the extra mile (Kumar 1996). Furthermore, in an era of more flexible organisation forms, there appears to be a shift from institutional (where trust is represented by the firm, brand or product) to relational trust (where trust is enshrined in what people do) (Rousseau et al. 1998). This change in emphasis is manifested when a party has a fundamental belief/confidence that the other partner will act reliably and with integrity in the best interests of the other (Dwyer et al. 1987; Ganesan, Lewin and Johnston 1997; McDonald et al. 1997; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wilson 1995).

In conclusion, there is little doubt that repeated cycles of exchange, risk-taking and successful fulfilment of expectations strengthen the willingness of parties to rely upon each other and, as a result expand the relationship, in effect producing a virtuous circle that can be developed and promoted (Doney and Cannon 1997; Gundlach and Murphy 1993). The alternative, untrustworthiness, may precipitate a downward spiral of conflict leading to diminished operations or failure (Currall and Inkpen 2000).

Co-operation, Co-ordination and Collaboration (C3 Behaviour)

Co-operative, co-ordinating and collaborative (C3) Behaviour is defined as working together/jointly to bring resources into a required relationship to achieve effective operations in harmony with the strategies/objectives of the parties involved, thus resulting in mutual benefit (Humphries and Wilding 2004). C3 Behaviour is seen as being essential to maintain a successful business partnership (Axelrod 1984; Metcalf et al. 1992) especially when it is linked with commitment to the achievement of shared, realistic goals (Sheth and Sharma 1997; Stern and Reve 1980). Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Oliver (1990) also describe the importance of pursuing mutually beneficial interests but additionally emphasise the fundamentally co-operative nature of business life characterised by balance and harmony. These views are significant because they provide a concept of the boundary markers within which productive relationships can take place (Mohr and Spekman 1994) and can often lead to the discovery of even more successful ways to co-operate and new objects of co-operation (Doz and Baburoglu 2000). When C3 Behaviour is viewed in action, it is viewed as similar or complementary, co-

ordinated actions needed to achieve mutual outcomes with reciprocation over time (McDonald et al. 1997; Metcalf et al.; Moorman et al. 1992; Oliver 1990; Sheth and Sharma 1997). At a higher level, co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration rather than pure exchange are used to create real value; an organisational competence known as 'collaborative advantage' which requires developed mechanisms, structures, skills and processes (Anderson et al. 1994, Moss Kanter 1994). And then there is the more product-oriented approach that mentions collaboration or coalescing between buyers and sellers to produce quality products and contain costs over an indefinite stream of transactions (Rugman and D'Cruz 2000). The importance of capitalising on supplier's expertise by early involvement in early design phase is also mentioned (Metcalf et al. 1992). Lastly, Spekman et al. (1998), in their significant research of US manufacturing industries, did not underestimate the difficulty of achieving the step changes or transformation in mind set and strategic orientation among supply chain partners needed to attain functional integration, joint planning and technology sharing.

Trust and C3 Behaviour in Combination

From the literature in these 2 areas it is apparent that over time, trust supported by credible actions is likely to establish a virtuous circle of ever-improving business-to-business relationship performance. Covey (1989) described 3 generic levels of contribution of trust and C3 Behaviour to a business relationship:

- **Win/Lose or Lose Win:** defensiveness, protectiveness, legalistic language, contracts that attempt to cover all the bases, are full of qualifiers and escape clauses and, where the atmosphere promotes further reasons to defend and protect.
- **Compromise:** mutual respect and confrontation avoidance, polite but not emphatic communication, creativity suppressed.
- **Win/Win:** synergy, high trust and sincerity produce solutions better than the sum of the contributions, participants enjoy a creative enterprise.

These ideas are shown in Figure 1 which suggests that there is likely to be a correlation between these factors.

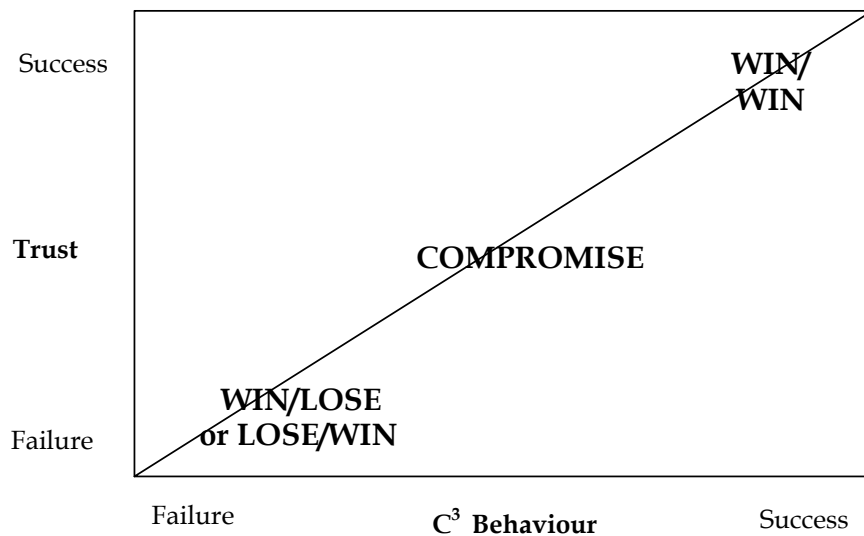


Figure 1. The Combination of C³ Behaviour and Trust to Relationship Quality.

We now describe a theoretical approach and research methodology, which set out to test this hypothesis.

Theoretical Framework

An extensive literature search for a theoretical model to illustrate the relationship dynamics between monopoly businesses suggested that Williamson's (1975) Organisations Failure Framework, adapted and shown in Figure 2, provided the closest fit (Wilding and Humphries 2002). This negative cycle, leads away from the market to business internalisation and provides both face validity in the environment in question and an explanation of the adversarial business relationship circumstances that could lead to and sustain monopoly (Humphries and Wilding 2003). It was thus selected as an appropriate device with which to expose the association between trust and C³ Behaviour found within long-term collaborative business arrangements as experienced in major UK Defence Procurements (Hartley 1998, Humphries and Wilding 2001).

Research Methodology

The research aims were to understand the relationship dynamics within long-term, collaborative businesses and to determine if success factors such as Trust and C³ Behaviour were able to assist managers to break out of the essentially negative cycle represented by Figure 1. The units of analysis were

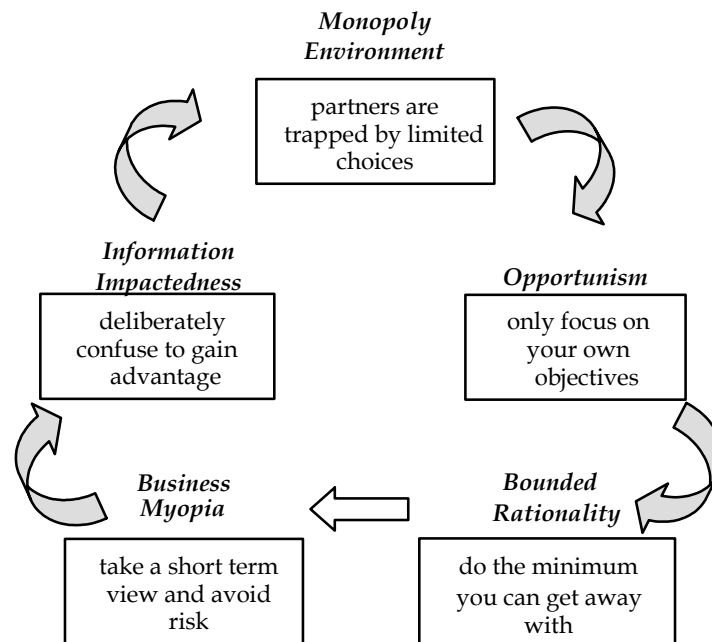


Figure 2. Business Relationship Failure Cycle.

the relationship between UK Defence Logistics Organisation businesses that procured very high technology, military equipment spare parts, repair and engineering design services and their Defence Industry partners. Each pair of teams was composed of engineering, procurement, finance and commercial personnel. The teams managed a wide spectrum of equipment age (some as old as 35 years or as young as 3 years), technical complexity (periscopes to advance electronics), team size (from 12 to 50) and financial expenditure (from £600k to £50m). An exploratory research project was designed to take a wide, cross-sectional perspective in order to make a statement about the outcomes of broadly comparable experiences using numerical supporting evidence. It therefore used the key informant methods of surveys (600 staff questionnaires – 5 point Likert scales) supported by 115 team-leader semi-structured interviews. The instrument was constructed from a pool of measures drawn from the literature and its reliability was confirmed using the Alpha Coefficient (Cronbach 1950). A self-selected census, (we wrote to all the MoD team managers and asked them to choose the relationships to be researched), of 54 monopolistic relationships representing £575.8m annual spend within the UK Defence Procurement organisation (a 10% sample by value) allowed the collection and analysis of large quantities of data to determine the range and strength of factors within the conceptual framework. It was acknowledged that such a sample could generate skewed results however, follow-up analysis indicated a wide cross-

section of the Defence Logistics Organisation businesses in terms of size, spend and maturity and respondents from a representative sample of personnel roles which led us to believe that sample bias could be ignored.

The project also took a relational perspective in identifying the main types of interaction and thus included data collection by qualitative methods in order to capture the richness of perceptions needed to gain insight into the subtleties and cultural depth of the business problem. After the team-leaders had studied their relationship survey report, each was interviewed separately to determine the perceived reasons for the statistical results. Over 700 key points were selected and stored in a database and organised for analysis by theoretical dimension, behavioural variable, satisfaction score and relationship. Special attention was devoted to providing feedback to the research participants (individual anonymity was always preserved rigorously) by means of high level reports following the completion of each relationship pair data collection exercise, as well as head office and web-based summaries of the research findings at the end of the project. The production of independent, frank relationship information was highly valued by the organisations involved and in many cases relationship maintenance arrangements received a much-needed boost as a result.

A key facet of the research was to investigate the relationship between trust, C3 Behaviour and relationship success. To this end 7 measures for C3 Behaviour and 2 measures for Trust were selected from the 38 that comprised the questionnaire. All had been previously validated in research that measured similar constructs. Great care was taken to ensure that the 2 groupings were discrete and without overlapped meaning. To this end the words such as: 'both parties and shared jointly' were used to underline the C3 dimension and specific use of the word 'trust' characterised those measuring the Trust dimension. The reliability of this approach was again confirmed using the Alpha Coefficient (Cronbach 1950).

C3 Behaviour (Co-operation, Co-ordination, Collaboration)

- The relationship encourages the achievement of high performance by both parties i.e. reliable equipment, on-time delivery, good forecasts (Mohr and Spekman 1994).
- When an unexpected problem arises, both parties would rather work out a solution than hold each other to the original contract terms (Doney and Cannon 1997).
- Both parties co-operate wholeheartedly (Mohr and Spekman 1994).
- The relationship provides a dynamic business environment within which both parties can seek increasing rewards (Noordewier et al. 1990).

- We provide the other party with regular information including long-range forecasts to enable him to do his business better (Mohr and Spekman 1994).
- The responsibility for making sure the relationship works is shared jointly (Heide and Miner 1992).
- The other party provides us with useful cost reduction and quality improvement ideas (Noordewier et al. 1990).

Trust

- We trust the other party to act in our best interests (Morgan and Hunt 1994).
- We trust that the other party is genuinely concerned that our business succeeds (Metcalf et al. 1990).

The quantitative and qualitative data results from this sub-set of measures were then analysed.

Research Results

Surprisingly, the overall quantitative data (mean relationship success/failure ratings based upon the positive or negative Likert scale responses) findings shown in Figure 3 revealed that the essentially negative Business Relationship Failure Cycle of Figure 2 was not so in practice with 77% of the individual relationships scoring 50% satisfaction or better with a mean of 64% across all 5 dimensions. However, this is not to suggest that these relationships were without tension or opportunism. Respondent's comments equated to the Win/Lose or Lose/Win element of Figure 1 and described later in the paper suggest that severe negative behaviours were also present.

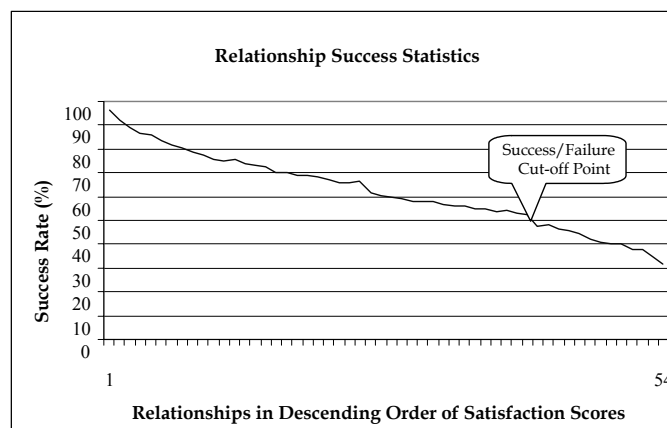


Figure 3. Overview of Relationship Success/Failure

Sub-sets of the statistical data representing trust and C3 Behaviour were extracted and correlated with a resultant coefficient of 0.801. When plotted in the scatter graph in Figure 4 it can be seen that a reasonably good fit was achieved.

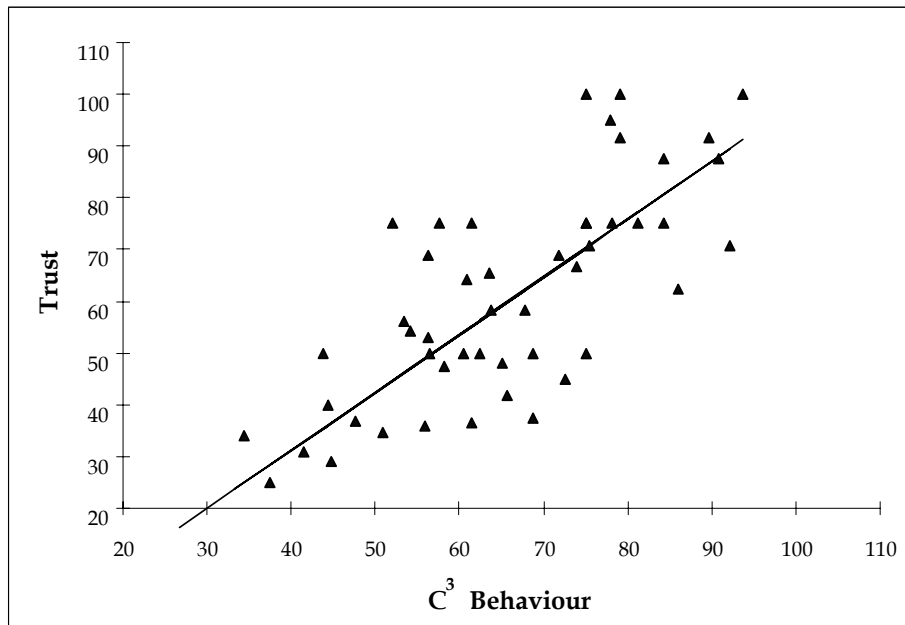


Figure 4. Scatter Graph Showing Research Results for Trust and C3 Behaviour

The qualitative data (700 semi-structured interview key points) were sorted according to the 5 theoretical framework dimensions and the C3/Trust relational variables and ranked by relationship success scores thus providing positive linkage with the quantitative data and findings. The research was thus able to determine both the broad statistical trends and some of the underlying reasoning. The qualitative data were placed into up-to 50%, 50-70% and 70 and above % groupings to match the 3 approximate classifications from Covey's (1989) model. Extracts from these bandings showing satisfaction score and respondent role are provided below in order to illustrate the interaction of Trust and C3 Behaviour. It can be seen that the statistical correlation is supported by the overall tenor of managers' remarks.

Win/Lose or Lose/Win

Relationships are characterised by defensiveness, protectiveness, legalistic language, contracts that attempt to cover all the bases, are full of qualifiers and escape clauses and, where the atmosphere promotes further reasons to defend and protect.

- *“Of all their departments we speak to, the Commercial staff are the worst. They are set in their ways, won’t take risks, have an adversarial mindset and they slow things down”.* (38%, Industry MD)
- *“We offered to remove components prior to a return to works programme which their engineers approved and believed would save us £2m. They offered us a rebate of £2.5k. The nerve of it”.* (17%, MoD Team Leader)
- *“Quality and giving the end-customer the best equipment to do the job should be our joint, prime aims in life. Instead we appear to be trying to catch each other out and score points”.* (41%, Industry Commercial Manager)
- *“We asked them to quote for an order worth over £1m. Only 9 mths later after some pressure did we get a response”.* (31%, MoD Team Leader)
- *“We have a built a lengthy bid approvals process that is designed to protect ourselves because we have been stung by the customer in the past. This does not come cheap and is reflected in our price”.* (48%, Industry Team Leader)
- *“In this day and age I believe no large company will try to rip-off such a big customer. The audit trail and accountability are there so why not trust us?”* (48%, Industry Team Leader)

Compromise

Relationships are characterised by mutual respect and confrontation-avoidance, polite but not emphatic communication and, suppressed creativity. The following qualitative data extracts reflect these features.

- *“Currently quotes take a long time to process. I am suggesting 2 monthly meetings with their Commercial Officer to smooth the task”.* (64%, Industry Team Leader)
- *“We don’t agree all the time but at least we communicate clearly”.* (58%, MoD Team Leader)
- *“We desperately need better performance management systems to ensure that actions are logged and analysed against standards”.* (57%, Industry Production Engineer)
- *“They often tender excessive price quotations, which are reduced after challenge. This does not engender a trusting relationship”.* (60%, Industry Team Leader)
- *“Although we work well with our opposite numbers in the Company, I am always wary of a hidden agenda in their hierarchy”.* (51%, MoD Supply Chain Manager)
- *“Because my opposite number’s job could be on the line he has a vested interest in portraying a warm, comfortable position”.* (58%, MoD Team Leader)

Win/Win

Relationships are characterised by synergy where high trust and sincerity produce solutions better than the sum of the contributions and participants enjoy a creative enterprise. The following qualitative data extracts reflect these features.

- *“When we were able to focus together on an emergency programme to replace defective, safety-critical items, the relationship quality improved enormously”*. (75%, MoD Team Leader)
- *“Joint presentations externally provide a reinforcing image of the partnership”*. (82%, Industry Team Leader)
- *“As the reputation of the team within the business has grown this has helped to boost the confidence of the members and spurred them on to further gains”*. (72%, Industry Team Leader)
- *“Frequent contacts, even as often as daily, build confidence, reduce risks of misunderstandings and keep the team focussed”*. (73%, Industry Team Leader)
- *“Our business success is based on trust. Recently we had a serious problem. The firm reacted instantly, sent a man and the job was done”*. (75%, MoD Team Leader)
- *“The trust that has built up over the years is a result of working together to achieve the desired end. I will go out of my way to help them solve any problem”*. (93%, Industry Sales Manager)
- *“Although the business arrangements and operational outputs of the 2 organisations are far from ideal, honesty and openness are not only promoted but are lived every day”*. (76%, Industry Supply Chain Manager)
- *“It’s very important to start small with innovative partnering arrangements in order to let the problems sort themselves out and to build up mutual trust”*. (95%, Industry Team Leader)

Summary of Findings

As predicted by the business relationship failure cycle in Figure 2, the results from this research clearly show that lack of co-operative behaviours such as adversarial commercial attitudes and practices, inadequate investment in specific assets such as work force stability and product/process development, the use of inappropriate performance measures, opportunistically providing poor goods and services and, using proprietary information as a weapon, reduced the growth of trust and therefore the chances of achieving interdependence and equitable outcomes. On the other hand despite the constraints imposed by a relationship that in some cases was termed ‘imprisonment’, strong counterbalancing, positive business drivers were able to produce examples of relationship-building specific

investments, co-operative behaviour, open communications and a desire to reduce the burden of governance through more equitable, long-term arrangements. These C3 Behaviours allowed trust to develop the relationship cycle to adopt the positive direction indicated in Figure 5 (Wilding and Humphries 2002).

Lessons for Practitioners

The research has highlighted a number of lessons for managers operating in long-term collaborative environments. There is a need to accept that there will inevitably be a reduction in freedom of independent action which may affect the perceived quality of the relationship. It is thus crucially important to reduce the impact of environmental influences such as traditional commercial attitudes, lack of long-term funding for projects and investment in process improvements that cause frustration and generate negative behaviours.

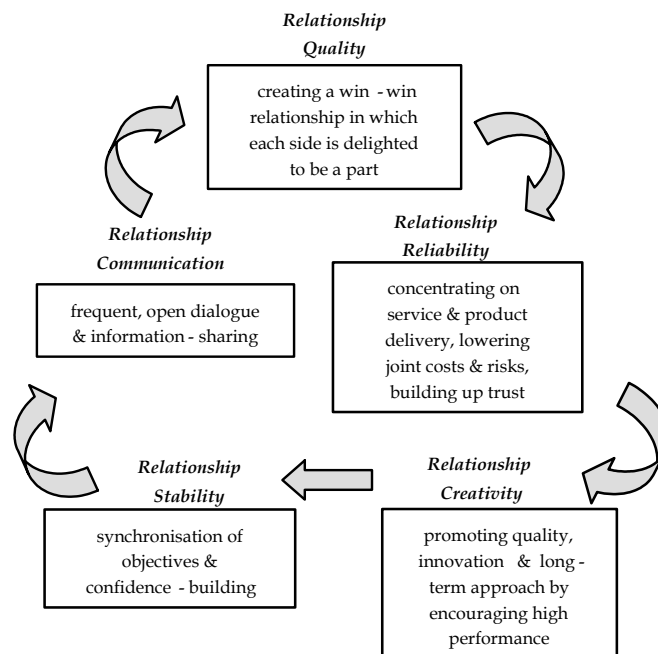


Figure 5. Business Relationship Success Cycle

This means building an inventory of environmental problems that are normally considered to be 'unavoidable features of the business' and seeking joint, innovative ways of dealing with them. Synchronised objectives, pursuing joint approaches to service and product delivery, lowering costs and risks and promoting measures to support the growth of trust appear to be the best ways of mitigating negative influences. The importance of

political acceptance of the lack of choice within long-term collaborations (Parker and Hartley 1997, Strutton et al. 2001), of selecting appropriate governance modes (contractual or relational) and being prepared to change them over time as circumstances evolved, were underlined. Lastly, the interaction of trust and C3 Behaviour in the Relationship Success Cycle indicates that a structured approach to improving relationships should be planned. Organisations should attempt small, simple, co-operative projects that improve efficiency because these are perceived as being non-threatening; discussions about costs should be left until some maturity has been achieved. This accords with research findings by Wilding (2003) in the electronics and telecoms industries and Taylor (1999) in the automotive industry.

Further Research Opportunities

This research has, for the first time achieved a cross-relationship perspective of a significant sample of long-term collaborative environments and opens up opportunities for further research. Exploration of the theoretical framework dimensions using Longitudinal approaches, Action and Experimental research methods, alternative theoretical fields such as sociology and organisational dynamics, especially using international comparisons, could provide extremely interesting and useful results. It should be emphasised that none of these opportunities for research should be viewed in isolation; many of them overlap and converge to offer the chance to carry out integrated research programmes.

Conclusion

This research appears to be the only empirical study which has examined long-term, collaborative business relationships using a significant sample of stable monopolies as a means of focussing on trust and C3 Behaviour without the confusing influence of competition. As a result, new insights have been revealed into the importance of these variables to relationship success, especially since it was found that their degree of contribution was directly correlated. The results also provide valuable practical advice to managers and offer academics a potentially interesting agenda for future research to gain extended perspectives of sustained collaborative, business-to-business relationships.

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