

Managing Relational Tensions: The Professional Engagement Process

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Abstract

Personal ties may develop between boundary spanners as a result of their position as firm representatives, and are often actively encouraged to facilitate the successful management of interorganisational relationships. However, boundary spanners may experience tension between social and economic goals, which can result in the subordination of commercial objectives in favour of personal ties. We draw upon utility theory, cognitive dissonance theory, and construal level theory to propose a model that explains the cognitive process employed by boundary spanners to alleviate such tension, in favour of the firm. We label this process *professional engagement*. Our paper contributes to marketing theory as, despite the acknowledged existence of such tensions in business relationships, there is little known about their management, and the way in which they influence the achievement of firm objectives.

Introduction

Organisations delegate decision making and tasks to employees on the basis that they will act in the best interest of the employer in the accomplishment of commercial objectives. Of particular importance are boundary spanners, representatives at the edge of the organisation, who are essential to the initiation, development and maintenance of interorganisational relationships (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994). Agency theorists would suggest that boundary spanners may act in a self-interested manner, not necessarily aligned with the interests of the employing firm (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Eisenhardt, 1989). Accordingly, the organisation may choose to implement practices that aim to motivate, or control, boundary spanners towards organisational goals (Eisenhardt, 1989). Conversely, stewardship theorists would advocate the empowerment, rather than restriction, of boundary spanners, based on the assumption that the structural situation in which employees operate influences their ability to achieve commercial objectives (Donaldson and Davis, 1991). Despite the implementation of such practices within organisations, boundary spanners may not always behave functionally (in the best interests of the firm they represent). This might be due to a lack of commitment to the employing organisation, which can have a wide variety of causes. One such cause is that boundary spanners align their interest externally to the employing organisation as a result of personal attachments with individuals who represent their clients, business partners, or suppliers.

Organisations must ensure boundary spanning representatives behave functionally, but simultaneously, economic benefits may be realised if boundary spanners are able to develop interpersonal relationships with clients, partners, or suppliers (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990; Geiger and Turley, 2005). Interpersonal relationships foster relational capital (mutual liking, knowledge, trust and commitment to continuing a relationship), which focuses on relational assets that accrue at the dyadic level (Gelfand *et al.*, 2006). Relational assets may counter opportunism, increase trust, boost commitment levels, and reduce the likelihood of relationship dissolution (Inkpen and Beamish, 1997; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994). Although the goals for relational capital and economic capital should not be thought of as mutually exclusive (Gelfand *et al.*, 2006), if commercial objectives are regularly subordinated in favour of personal ties, there is a risk that the boundary spanner may decide to support the

maintenance of relational capital to the detriment of organisational goals (Hu and Korneliusson, 1997; Nooteboom, Berger and Noorderhaver, 1997).

The boundary spanner is simultaneously enacting two roles, which we label the *affective role* and the *commercial role*. The former refers to a boundary spanner's interpersonal attachment to another individual (e.g. an alliance partner, or service representative). Little consensus exists in extant literature regarding the nature of interpersonal attachment in business relationships; the terms friendship, social bonds, closeness, liking, personal commitment and interpersonal trust, amongst others, are often used synonymously in its description (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Ferguson, Pauline and Bergeron, 2005; Guenzi and Pelloni, 2004; Haytko, 2004; Neilson, 1998; Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi, 2001; Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005; Wilson, 1995). We define the affective role as a boundary spanner's feeling of emotional attachment to another individual, which may not necessarily be reciprocated, but results in ties of obligation similar to those associated with friendship (see Duck, 1998; Fehr, 1996). In contrast, the commercial role refers to a boundary spanner's duty as a firm representative working only towards commercial goals on behalf of their employing firm. If the interests between these roles are inconsistent, managing everyday actions and decisions to ensure favourable outcomes for both parties may be difficult (Nooteboom, Berger and Noorderhaver, 1997), and often results in an unpleasant tension state for the boundary spanner (Adams, 1976; Friedman and Podolny, 1992; Swan *et al.*, 2001). In the extreme, this may be manifested in dysfunctional behaviours, including corruption or embezzlement (Nooteboom, Berger and Noorderhaver, 1997), unethical behaviour (Brass, Butterfield and Skaggs, 1998; Beatty *et al.*, 1996), and 'side-changing', where, as a result of personal ties, individuals act in the interests of another company instead of their employer (Ford, 1990).

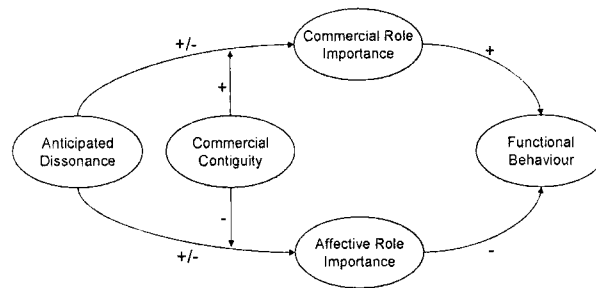
In response to such risks, organisations may design complex contracts and reporting systems that enable the alignment of the interests of the firm and the boundary spanner, through restriction of behaviours that are not in favour of the employing organisation (Eisenhardt, 1989). However, such practices may be ineffective (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson, 1997) and boundary spanners may try to game performance indicators, or manipulate strategic information to mask dysfunctional behaviour (Jawroski and Young, 1992). Alternatively, firms may try to prevent one-to-one attachments between boundary spanners and external stakeholders by rotating, encouraging team work, and providing multiple staff contacts (Bendapudi and Leone, 2002). Unfortunately, in restricting their development, the benefits these personal attachments afford will be significantly diminished (Young, 2001).

Concurrently, there may be individual differences among boundary spanners in their management of tension between commercial and affective roles: some may choose to align their interest more fully with the employing organisation (the commercial role), whereas others will align with external parties (the affective role). Yet, there is little known about this process of alignment, and extant literature provides limited insight into how behaviour is construed individually, so that tension is reduced at the individual level. In this paper, we address this important gap and offer a conceptual model to explain the cognitive processes adopted by boundary spanners that result in the reduction of such tension in favour of the firm. We explore employee behaviours that affect the performance of interpersonal relationships, and propose a new concept, *professional engagement*. The paper provides a first step in contributing to more effective relationship marketing practice by helping business managers to improve the design and implementation of their relationship marketing strategies.

The Professional Engagement Process

Our conceptual model draws upon several theories to explain how boundary spanners reduce the tension between commercial and affective roles, in favour of behaving functionally. Following random utility theory (RUT; McFadden, 1973; Thurstone, 1927), it is argued that boundary spanners derive utility from functional behaviour as a result of the weight they place on commercial and affective roles. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; Festinger, 1964) suggests that these roles may be psychologically inconsistent; resulting in a tension state for the boundary spanner. In order to alleviate this tension, boundary spanners may change the importance weightings they apply to commercial and affective roles. Based on construal level theory (Liberman and Trope, 1998; Trope and Liberman, 2003), we propose *commercial contiguity* (closeness to tasks, outcomes and actors associated with the commercial role) explains reduction of this tension in favour of the commercial role, which in turn drives functional behaviour. We label this process Professional Engagement (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Professional Engagement Process



Functional Behaviour

Following RUT (McFadden, 1973; Thurstone, 1927), boundary spanners are expected to engage in functional behaviour (actions that are in the best interests of the firm), if this choice maximises the boundary spanner's utility. Utility values can be divided into a systematic and random component (Chapman and Staelin, 1982). The former consists of attributes reflecting the commercial role, the affective role, and effort associated with functional behaviour, and the latter comprises those factors influencing utility from functional behaviour that cannot be observed - individual idiosyncrasies (Louviere, Hensher and Swait, 2000). Therefore, a boundary spanner's utility from functional behaviour can be defined as:

$$U_{nj} = (\beta_1 CR) + (\beta_2 AR) + (\beta_3 FBE) + \varepsilon_{nj},$$

where CR is the commercial role, AR is the affective role, FBE is a boundary spanner's perception of effort associated with behaving in a functional manner, and ε_{nj} the random component of utility. Individual differences will be observed in the importance that boundary spanners attach to the affective and commercial roles. The weight given to each role will reflect what the boundary spanner believes about that role, and the influence that those roles will have on perceived utility. In times of tension, the importance weightings a boundary spanner places on each of the roles are proposed to have a direct impact on functional behaviour:

Proposition 1a: Functional behaviour is positively influenced by the importance weighting placed on the commercial role.

Proposition 1b: Functional behaviour is negatively influenced by the importance weighting placed on the affective role.

Tension between Commercial and Affective Roles

Commercial and affective roles are highly integrated because they are both embedded in the context of the interorganisational relationship between two firms. The affective role is likely to develop between boundary spanners as a result of their position as firm representatives, and is often actively encouraged to facilitate the management of the commercial role (Geiger and Turley, 2005). When these roles are inconsistent (that is, when they conflict), the process of aligning oneself with the commercial (affective) role, rather than the affective (commercial) role will be especially confusing as the boundaries between the roles are blurred (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000). Boundary spanners may find it challenging therefore to “decouple the roles psychologically, fully disengaging from one in favour of another” (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000, p. 481).

We focus on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957, 1964) to explain the nature of conflict between affective and commercial roles. Dissonance may arise as a result of feeling responsible for causing predictable negative outcomes, *even if those outcomes are yet to occur* (Cooper, 1999; Cooper and Fazio, 1984). Boundary spanners may therefore experience anticipated dissonance (Festinger, 1964) because, when commercial and affective roles conflict, whatever decision a boundary spanner makes will inevitably lead to postdecisional regret. Maintaining relational capital (the affective role) may bring about consequences that are not in the best interest of the firm, and therefore compromise one’s commercial role, and vice versa. This will be exacerbated by the fact such decisions regarding the affective role fall within the “social realm” (Norton, Vandello and Darley, 2004, p.818). A poor decision with respect to affective and commercial roles may threaten a boundary spanner’s positive view of the self, and threaten their image in the eyes of others (e.g. their manager or ‘friend’).

Dissonance is an unpleasant, negative internal state and, when experienced, the boundary spanner will be motivated towards a means for its reduction (Elliot and Devine, 1994; Festinger, 1957). There are three ways in which dissonance can be reduced (Leippe and Eisenstadt, 1999). First, one of the two conflicting cognitions can be changed so that they are no longer inconsistent. Second, cognitions can be added that allow the discrepancy between the cognitions to reduce or disappear. Finally, the importance of the dissonant cognitions can be reduced, which is referred to as *trivialisation* (Simon, Greenberg and Brehm, 1995, p.247). The purpose of trivialisation is not to reduce the level of inconsistency, but to reduce the *importance* of the inconsistency by reducing the importance of one or more of the dissonant elements (Simon, Greenberg and Brehm, 1995). In some cases, it may be necessary to apply multiple modes of dissonance reduction (Leippe and Eisenstadt, 1999). Here, it is proposed that anticipated dissonance will result in a change in importance weightings a boundary spanner holds for affective and commercial roles:

Proposition 2: Anticipated dissonance associated with commercial and affective roles will result in an increase or decrease in the importance weightings a boundary spanners places on either, or both, of the commercial and affective roles.

Commercial Contiguity

We focus on understanding the drivers of professional engagement, rather than professional disengagement. That is, which variables will influence a boundary spanner’s decision to act in the best interest of the firm, rather than in the interest of an individual with whom they have developed a personal attachment. Drawing upon construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2003; Liberman and Trope, 1998), it is proposed that, *Commercial Contiguity*, which we

define as closeness to tasks, outcomes and actors associated with the boundary spanner's role as a firm representative, will result in greater importance being placed on the commercial role, which in turn positively influences functional behaviour. 'Construal level', 'the abstractness of the mental representation' that is formed by the boundary spanner (Kardes, Cronley and Kim, 2006, p.135), is primarily determined by psychological distance, but can vary along many dimensions (Lewin, 1951; Trope and Liberman, 2003), such as temporal distance (Liberman, Sagristano and Trope, 2002; Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman, 2003) and sensory distance (Kardes, Cronley and Kim, 2006). Construal level is generally considered to be high or low: higher-level construals are associated with abstract, superordinate goals, and lower-level construals focus on concrete, subordinate goals. In the context of temporal construal, distant future events are represented in terms of abstract, higher-level concepts, whereas temporally proximal events are represented in terms of concrete, lower-level concepts (Trope and Liberman, 2003). Sensory distance decreases as the degree or amount of contact with an object/person increases. When an object/person is physically absent, sensory distance is high and individuals are likely to think about the object/person in abstract terms. Here, it is proposed that when tasks and people associated with the commercial role are perceived as contiguous to the individual, boundary spanners are likely to develop more intense affective, cognitive, and behavioural responses than when those tasks and people are more distant. For example, a boundary spanner may decide to offer more favourable terms to a customer with whom they are personally involved when the consequences of this action are not immediate. Application of construal level theory in the context of tension between commercial and affective roles would suggest the following:

Proposition 3: The greater the commercial contiguity, the more importance a boundary spanner will place on the commercial role, and the less importance he/she will place on the affective role.

Individual differences regarding professional engagement may also be due to factors such as commitment to the firm one represents (Meyer and Allen, 1997), commitment to the employing firm of the representative with whom one has a personal attachment (McElroy, Morrow and Laczniak, 2001), work ethics and professionalism (Bartol, 1979), personality (Raja, Johns and Ntalianis, 2004), and gender (Markiewicz, Devine and Kausilas, 2000). Differences may also be as a result of the individual's perception of organisational support (Stamper and Johlke, 2003), behavioural control (Ajzen, 2002), and levels of autonomy within commercial and/or affective roles (Davis et al., 1997; Spreitzer, 1995).

Conclusions and Further Research

The proposed conceptualisation explains how boundary spanners reduce tension between affective and commercial roles. We focus upon dyadic interactions, and the individual as the unit of analysis. However, we acknowledge that the consideration of tension between economic and affective goals within the context of the wider social network may prove a fruitful area for future study. Network connections facilitate and constrain the flexibility, autonomy, and consequently the effectiveness, of organisational members (Burt, 1992), which may influence an individual's propensity to professionally engage. Qualitative fieldwork is currently being carried out, which will inform the design of experiments to test the proposed professional engagement process, and its effects on the propensity for boundary spanners to behave functionally. This paper contributes to the marketing literature by offering insights into the impact of tension in business relationships on the behaviour of boundary spanners.

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