

Breakdown and restoration of business relationships: How to avoid the dissolution of long-term partnerships?

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ABSTRACT

The study of the dynamics of business relationships has given rise to two different streams of research. On the one hand the majority of researchers have been interested in their positive phase of formation and development, while on the other hand a minority has tried to apprehend their negative phase of degradation and dissolution. In that field of research, studies have tried to capture the phenomena related to the deterioration and termination of relationships by analysing the main reasons behind their dissolution, the disengagement strategies or the various stages of the dissolution process.

Although such work has brought new insights to the understanding of relationships, its main purpose was not to explain how the deterioration could be countered. In fact, few researches have been devoted to the study of the process by which a termination can be avoided once the relationship has entered its dissolving stage. This is why it seems necessary to study the process and the actions that are needed to rescue a relationship. We must look into the possibility of detecting troubled relationships and wonder what strategies can be used to stop the ending process.

Studying the restoration of relationships seems essential to understand the dynamics of partnerships. The theoretical and managerial implications of this phenomenon thus suggest the need to undertake research in this field. "The study of repair, forgiveness, and reconstruction of relationships should be a high priority for organization and management scholars and practitioners" (Van de Ven 2004).

Although current research in marketing, which is related to the study of dissolving business relationships or to the analysis of their restoration, does represent a necessary preliminary basis, it nevertheless appears limited when it comes to giving a clear account of the repairing process. That is the reason why we have resorted to models developed in social psychology in order to build a process model of the restoration of deteriorating partnerships.

Keywords: restoration, repair, dissolution, business relationships.

Introduction

The bulk of recent research in marketing is in keeping with the relational marketing paradigm which "refers to all marketing activities oriented towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morgan and Hunt 1994). From that perspective, the vast majority of researchers have been interested in the formation as well as the development of business relationships (Dwyer et al. 1987, Ford 1982, Håkansson 1982, Heide and John 1990, Ring and Van de Ven 1994, Van de Ven 1986, Wilson and Mummala 1986) while some have tried to examine what pertains to their deterioration and dissolution. Accordingly, studies have tried to capture the phenomena related to the degradation and termination of relationships by analysing the main reasons for dissolution (Hocutt 1998, Keaveney 1995, Perrien et al. 1995, Ping 1999, Prim-allaz et al. 2001, Roos 1999, Stewart 1998b), the disengagement strategies (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000, Freeman 2001, Giller and Matear 2001, Pressey and Mathews 2002, Pressey and Mathews 2003), or the various stages of the dissolution process (Ping and Dwyer 1992, Stewart 1998a, Tähtinen 2001b, Tähtinen 2001a, Tähtinen 2002).

Although such work has brought new insights to the understanding of relationships, its main purpose was not to explain how deterioration can be countered. In fact, few studies have been devoted to the process by which a termination can be avoided once a relationship has entered its dissolving stage. As suggested by Morgan et Hunt (1994), "just as medical science should understand both sickness and health, marketing science should understand both functional and dysfunctional relationships". If we develop that metaphor, it also seems possible to claim that marketing, just as medical science, should be able to propose "remedies" that would make it possible to avoid the termination of a dissolving relationship. Thus, marketing research ought to be able to provide managers with indicators with which they could diagnose the symptoms of a dysfunctional relationship, as well as to suggest appropriate treatments. In other words, the underlying aim of studies looking at dissolving partnerships should be to define restoring strategies. This is why it seems necessary to study the process and the actions that are needed to save a relationship.

The question then remains to know to what extent a troubled relationship can be detected and what strategies can be used to restore it. More precisely, it is important to understand what the elements that reveal an intention to exit are, and how the declining dynamics can be countered. The answer to that question will bring new elements to the overall understanding of the dynamics of marketing relationships. From a theoretical point of view, first of all, the study of restoration will give us more elements to better understand the dynamics of partnerships while clarifying the interrelations of the developing and dissolving processes. Moreover, emphasizing the relational elements which deteriorate during the ending process will make it possible to more accurately define the various kinds of deterioration that business relationships can undergo. In the end, this will help researchers, first to describe the strategies that can be used to cope with the various situations one can envisage, and then to suggest a classification of these strategies.

These theoretical contributions will result in concrete managerial answers that will give managers the means to avoid the dissolution of the most important relationships. They will thus be able to bring satisfactory solutions to the discontent of their most important or most profit-making partners. Safeguarding those relationships will make it possible to preserve the investments that would lose most of their worth in case of a dissolution. Bringing to light the disturbing events that occur in the first stages of the dissolution process will also make it possible for companies to offer quick and appropriate responses to the problems encountered by their customers. The theoretical and managerial implications of this phenomenon thus suggest the need to undertake research in this field. "The study of repair, forgiveness, and reconstruction of relationships should be a high priority of organization and management scholar and practitioners" (Van de Ven 2004).

Literature review

Contributions of research on dissolution to the study of relationship restoration

The research devoted to studying the dissolution of business relationships can fall into three groups, each working from a specific critical angle. We will present each one of these trends in order to outline their contributions to our understanding of the means to repair dissolving partnerships, as well as to underline their limitations.

The first type, *the decision models*, conceives of rupture as a mere decision whether to put an end to the relationship or not. The researchers who adopt this viewpoint have tried to understand the various reasons that could explain why a partner would choose to withdraw, as well as the consequences of such a decision and the factors that may influence it. These models make it possible to better grasp the various factors (as for example, lower quality, price problems, interpersonal conflicts, etc.) that have an impact on the decision to end or to maintain an unsatisfactory relationship. Thus, they also make it possible to understand the circumstances that are likely to support and/or inhibit repair. Yet, since they focus solely on the decision to exit, those models also fail to consider other significant elements, such as the respective roles of the two protagonists or the degree of advancement of the ending process, and their impact on the degree to which the relationship can be repaired.

The second trend in research does not conceive of dissolution as a decision, but rather as a strategy of disengagement which will be implemented by the initiator of the dissolution in order to signify his/her intention to his/her partner. Mostly based on the work of Baxter (1985), these *communication models* try to identify and list the disengagement strategies that can be used to put an end to a relationship, as well as the effects of each of them on the dissolution process, the companies involved, and the other actors that make up their network. Those models lend a new perspective to the analysis of dissolution and the repairing of relationships, by putting forth the fact that the initiator's behaviour and his/her partner's responses may have a positive or negative impact on how the relationship evolves. Thus, resorting to a so-called "polite" strategy will support the possibility that the protagonists negotiate, and therefore make it possible for the partner who is subjected to a dissolving relationship to solve the various problems that constitute the threat. However, those models are not directly concerned with the restoring of the relationship, and for that reason they do not provide elements to understand all of the phenomena that are related to it.

Finally, the third type of research adopts a more holistic approach than the previous two, in the sense that the models it produces try to represent the dissolution process and its various stages as a whole. The proponents of this *processual approach*, indeed, have shown that the termination of a business relationship can be better described as a process rather than as a mere decision. They have thus brought to light the various phases which a relationship goes through before it is definitely broken off. The researchers associated with this trend have been the first to explicitly raise the question of the restoration of troubled relationships by suggesting that the ending process can be interrupted by the actions and the behaviour of both parties. Yet, although those models constitute a valuable basis for studying the restoration of vertical relationships, they are nevertheless limited for us here. Indeed, they merely consider the possibility of repairing during the first stages of the dissolution process, even though we do think it is also possible to save the relationship at some more advanced stages. Moreover, those models only briefly deal with the actions coming from that of the partners who is subjected to the dissolution, since the perspective adopted by the authors of such models is primarily turned toward the initiator.

Studying the restoration of dissolving relationships

In this section, we shall present the conclusions arrived at by research in marketing, and we shall look at the models developed in psychosociology in order to underline their contributions to the study of restoration.

Restoring business relationships: the marketing perspective

Even though the idea of restoring relationships is a recent field of investigation, some studies already looking at these questions can be found in the literature. Some have tried to apprehend the warning signs of dissolution, others have been concerned with the factors which affect the potential for restoration, and others still have tried to identify the stages that compose the restoring process.

The first category of studies analyzing restoration is concerned with the elements that make it possible to anticipate a breakdown. Starting from the notion that the dissolution comes to the mind of the initiator before it is actually implemented, some studies have tried to identify *the warning signs* of deterioration. Thus we shall suggest a classification of those various signals by distinguishing between mental elements (declining satisfaction, intimacy, or trust, increasing negative emotions, etc.), and behavioural elements (complaining, giving up the product building customer loyalty, invitation to tender, researching information about available alternatives, etc.). Pointing out such warning signals constitutes an essential step in the analysis of the restoration of relationship. The party who is

subjected to the dissolution, indeed, cannot launch the restoring process until he/she is aware that the dissolution is under way. It is therefore essential to be able to identify the signals given by the initiator in the first stages of that dissolution, if one is to envisage a relational repair.

Other studies try to grasp the impact of *the influencing factors* upon the potential for restoration. According to Vaaland (2004), in order to understand repair, one must not only look at the barriers laid on the way out (attenuating factors), but also at the elements that will actually promote dissolution (predisposing factors and precipitating events). From this, the author suggests that "by focusing on the three main determinants, and implementing them in managerial processes, the business divorce can be limited to cases where there is simply no other alternative but finding a new partner" (Vaaland 2004). Thus, various forces influence the relationship, either by supporting its preservation, or on the contrary by pushing toward its termination. Restoring a relationship, therefore, does not simply depend upon the existence or the introduction of some significant exit barriers, which lock up the partner in an unsatisfactory relationship. Those barriers merely constitute one form of leverage which is not sufficient in order to counter the ending process. In fact, "being forced to remain together may itself raise negative feelings" (Levinger 1979, p. 40). Hence, any business partner that wishes to avoid dissolution will have to rely both on the exit barriers and on the factors that facilitate the breakdown in order to minimise their effects or to make them disappear.

Finally, some researchers have adopted a more holistic approach to the restoration of relationships by trying to represent *the restoring process*. Thus, the studies conducted by Tähtinen and Vaaland (Tähtinen and Vaaland 2005, Vaaland 2004, Vaaland and Tähtinen 2003) have resulted in the first model that represents the restoring process of a dissolving business relationship. Tähtinen and Vaaland base their model upon a *dissolving relationship*, so as to understand in what way a relationship can be restored once it has already entered the negative phase of its life cycle. At the second stage, the partners' goal shall be *the identification of the various attenuating factors* which can inhibit or altogether stop the dissolution of a relationship. However, it is not enough to identify those various factors if one is to effectively restore the relationship. This identification will merely be used as grounds for the third stage, during which the parties will carry out an "*attenuating analysis*". This "includes an internal analysis of the content and the importance of the attenuating factors aiming at increasing the awareness of the negative consequences of relational dissolution" (Vaaland and Tähtinen 2003). This analysis, though, doesn't systematically result in the restoration of the relationship. "An attenuating analysis implies both an opportunity to restore the relationships as well as an enhanced risk of accelerated dissolution" (Tähtinen 2003). Whenever its conclusions are in favour of restoration, then some *restoring actions* can be implemented with the aim of alleviating the tensions that still remains between the two parties.

Repairing interpersonal relationships: the contributions of psychosociology

Research in marketing has generated some fundamental elements of knowledge for the studying and understanding of restoration. However, the various limits that have been identified suggest the necessity to develop this line of thought further in order to fully take into account what is specific about restoring relationships. From that point of view, the models that have been developed in psychosociology offer some fruitful perspectives which we shall present and resort to in the next sections. The conclusions of such research have, indeed, brought elements of information concerning two essential questions. A first group of studies have tried to capture the articulation of the ending and restoring processes, while other studies have been devoted to the identification of strategies that can make it possible to achieve restoration.

The first trend of research identified in the literature on this topic deals with *the question of the articulation of the ending and restoring processes* and tries to understand what position restoration holds within the dissolution. From that angle, two theses have been put forth. For some, restoration merely represents a stage in the dissolving process, which usually takes place after the dyadic phase during which the intentions are revealed. According to Lee (1984), the dissolving process includes five stages (Discovery, Exposure, Negotiation, Resolution, and Transformation), the third and fourth stages offering possibilities of restoration. Thus, during the resolution phase, "negotiating partners may choose to reconcile and repair the relationship [...] or simply end the relationship" (Lee 1984). The flow chart of disengagement developed by Baxter (1985, 1984) also supports a similar analysis, as it considers restoration as a single phase in that process. However, although these models do bring insights to the understanding of the phenomena related to repairing, other researchers have called this conceptualization into question. Positing the idea that dissolution is better conceived of as a process,

Duck (1984) has elaborated a repair model which takes into account the main characteristics of each phase of the dissolution so as to understand more accurately what the objectives of repair are at every stage of this process. The central claim of that model is that "the repairing of troubled relationships will be most effective when it takes account of the ordered stages through which they pass and addresses the concern and circumstances that are most prominent in the participants' minds at each phase" (Duck 1984). As a result, any attempt at recovery based on inappropriate elements or made at some inappropriate phase would be considerably less effective.

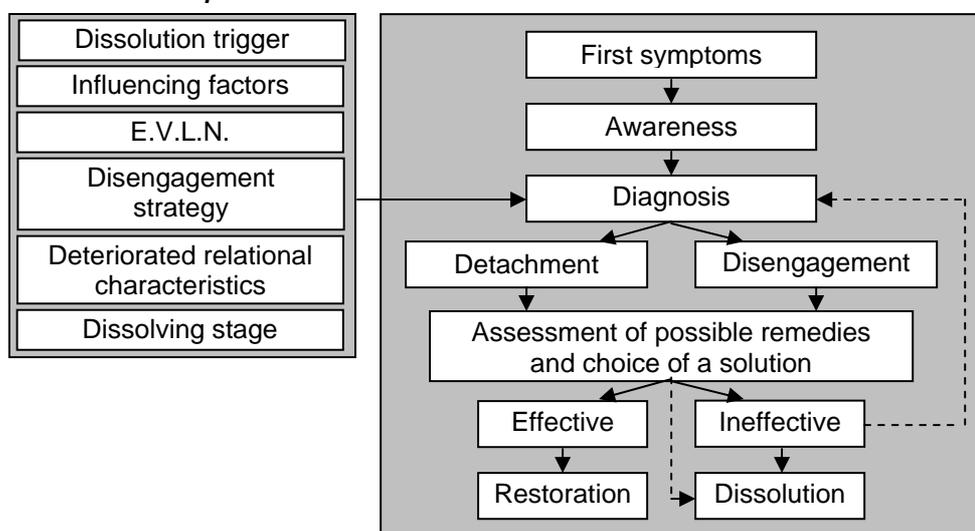
The second group of studies that constitute the literature on the topic focuses on *the identification of strategies* that partners can resort to in order to restore their relationship. According to Dindia and Baxter (Baxter and Dindia 1990, Dindia and Baxter 1987) it is possible to list fifty repair strategies for cases of troubled interpersonal relationships which can fall into eleven larger categories. Some of those categories will focus mainly on the dyadic relationship established between the two partners and will result either in an increase in communication about the relationship in general (communication strategies) or about the problem in particular (meta-communication), or in a decrease in communication (absence of meta-communication). In addition, the protagonists may resort to so-called pro-social strategies in order to try to improve the atmosphere of their relationship or, on the contrary, to anti-social strategies which can be expected to have a negative effect on the relationship. The parties may also try to repair their relationship by appealing to their common past history (ceremonies) or by seeking out innovation so as to avoid falling into a routine (anti-ritual strategies). One may also achieve restoration by reducing the distance from one's partner (togetherness) or by increasing it (seeking/allowing autonomy). The partners can also try to modify their environment in a positive manner by creating a more fertile environment, or in a negative manner by giving it a hostile character. Finally, the parties can seek outside support by appealing to the various actors that constitute their network. To sum up, the partners can opt for reward-oriented resistance that will "attempt to alter the disengagers' decision through the promise of, or enactment of behaviour which the disengager finds positive" (Baxter 1984), or cost-oriented resistance that "involve threatened or enacted sanctions against the disengager" (Baxter 1984).

Considering the limitations of the models produced by research in marketing, we have been led to resort to other, more advanced fields of literature to get a clearer view of the phenomena related to the question of restoration.

A process model of restoration

By analysing the different trends of literature, it now seems possible to develop a theoretical model which would present the dynamics of restoration (figure N°1). This model, developed on a theoretical basis, represents the repairing process, i.e. the various stages as well as the sequence of these phases. As we can see, the perspective adopted is that of the partner who is subjected to dissolution, the viewpoint of the initiator being only considered during the last phase.

Figure 1: A theoretical process of restoration



Phase 1: First symptoms

Any degradation, whether it concerns people or business relationships, begins with the outbreak of more or less explicit symptoms, which represent the first warning signals of that degradation. In the case of business relationships, the ending process begins whenever some event pushes either one of the two partners to call into question the preservation of that relationship. From the point of view of social exchange theory, this process will be triggered off as soon as the costs pertaining to the relationship exceed the benefits that are derived from it. That event will create an uncomfortable situation for the initiator, who will express his/her discontent by sending out various signals. Indeed, "for the relationship to be reshaped to meet the initiator's needs more adequately, the initiator must first capture the other person's attention. [...] The initiator begins to display discontent through cues and hints, by deeds as often as by words" (Vaughan 1986, p. 14). Those signs constitute the first symptoms of the deterioration of the relationship, and are usually not perceived by the counterpart. However, if the latter is able to detect them, he/she will be able to launch the restoring process, since he/she will now be aware that the relationship is confronting serious difficulties that can involve its termination.

Phase 2: Awareness

It is not enough that the first symptoms appear for the repairing process to begin. Indeed, discovering and becoming aware of those signals is a prerequisite to any restoring work. That second phase therefore represents a necessary stage for restoration to take place. If one fails to acknowledge the problems encountered by the initiator, one cannot launch the repairing process. Indeed, "negotiation cannot begin until both partners agree that a problem exists" (Vaughan 1986, p. 14).

Awareness can first of all be a direct consequence of *the initiator's behaviour*, who can verbally express his/her discontent to the other party. In that case, the initiator explicitly states his/her problems to his/her partner in order to seek repair. In other situations, awareness is a consequence of the sagacity of *the partner subjected to the breakdown*, that is to say his/her ability to detect the signals that the initiator is sending out. The company that is subjected to the termination of the relationship may, by resorting to its knowledge and its monitoring activities, manage to detect some events suggesting that the dissolution process is under way and that some repairing work is needed to avoid facing a breakdown. Some recent studies conducted by Machat (2004) have brought to light certain elements whose occurrences can be perceived as so many warning signals revealing the deterioration of the relationship. Last of all, it is also possible to imagine a third case in which the awareness would result from *other actors within the network*. Those actors may indeed have some knowledge of the issues that exist in the relationship, and bring them, directly or indirectly, to the attention of the partner subjected to the breakdown. In any case, the advancement of the dissolving process will, in part, influence the potential for repair. Consequently, the question how fast one becomes aware of the problems will have an impact upon the potential for restoration. Thus, the earlier one does become aware, the less advanced the ending process will be, and therefore the higher the potential for repair.

Phase 3: Diagnosis

Once the first symptoms have been detected, the role of medicine consists in carrying out a diagnosis in order to truly define the source of the problem and what its level of development (intensity) is. Similarly, after he/she has become aware of the danger that is threatening the relationship, the party subjected to the dissolution can move on to a diagnosis phase. That stage will essentially revolve around the question of assessing the relationship's potential for repair. As is suggested by the theoretical model, the diagnosis established by the partner subjected to dissolution ought to take many factors into account.

The dissolution trigger

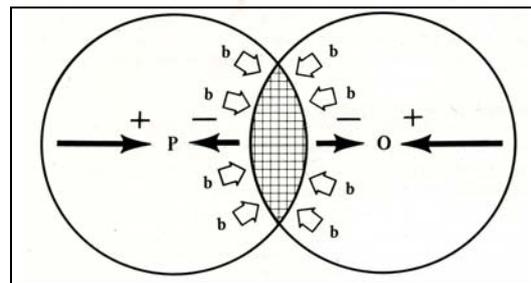
The researchers who are interested in the dissolution of relationships have put forth the idea according to which the dissolution process gets launched by a triggering event which represents the main cause of dissolution, or the element that has caused the relationship to switch into its negative phase. Roos (1999) also uses the term "pushing determinant", which she defines as "the switching determinant that is perceived by the customer as the reason for switching". Whether any troubled relationship gets repaired will depend on whether that decisive element is understood. The research carried out by Hibbard et al. (2001) show that customers' assessment, and therefore their reactions,

are conditioned by the intensity of the act and the attribution of its source. In other words, the aim here is to grasp the cause of the dissolution, as well as to assess its intensity (in terms of damage inflicted) and the manner in which the customer identifies the source of such an act (inside or outside the relationship). The partner who is subjected to the threat of dissolution must therefore, before he/she launches any repairing action, detect that element, analyze it, and understand it, in order to find the most appropriate solution for it.

The factors influencing dissolution

Although the dissolving process begins under the impulse of a trigger, its dynamic will be influenced by other closely related elements which can either speed up the process (predisposing factors and precipitating events), or on the contrary slow it down (attenuating factors). According to Levinger (1979), a two-partner relationship can be represented by the following figure:

Figure 2 : A representation of a dyadic relationship (Levinger 1979)



The size of the intersection refers to the degree of interdependence that characterizes the relationship. One can readily note that this interdependence area is affected by three main factors:

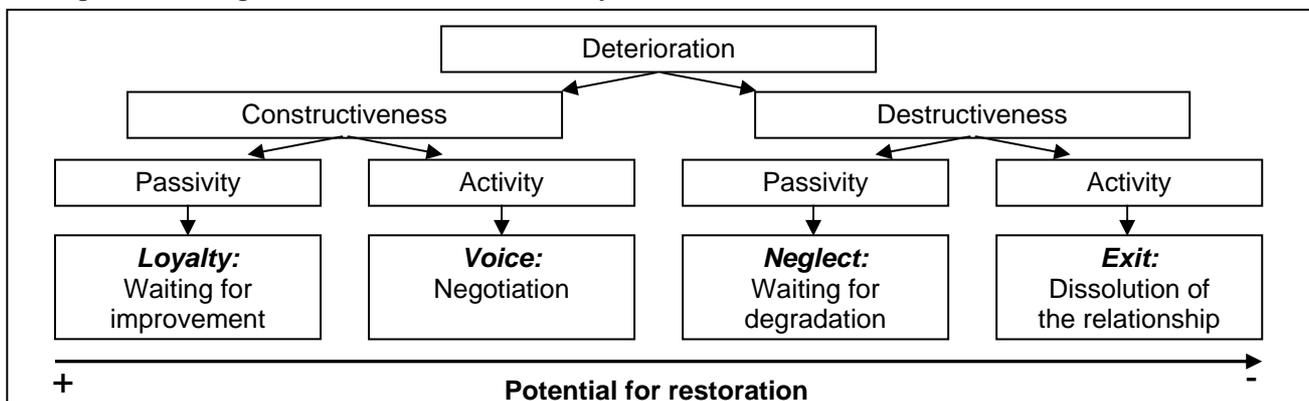
- *positive attractions (+)*, which represent the rewards derived from the relationship;
- *negative attractions (-)*, which have a contrary effect on the relationship and which correspond to the various costs generated by its maintenance and development;
- *exit barriers (b)*, which favour upholding the relationship. However, "barriers affect one's behavior only if one wishes to leave the relationship" (Levinger 1979).

Thus various forces affect the relationship either by supporting its preservation (positive attractions and exit barriers), or by pushing toward its breakdown. Consequently, every factor must be taken into account whenever a relationship is to be restored. As we have already mentioned, exit barriers merely constitute a form of leverage which is not sufficient to counter the ending process. "Being forced to remain together may itself raise negative feelings " (Levinger 1979). The partner who wishes to repair the relationship must also manage to restore its attractiveness by augmenting the positive attractions or by reducing the negative ones.

The response to deterioration (E.V.L.N.)

If we refer to the work of Hirschman (1972), which more recent studies have developed further, we seem able to establish a link between the various possible responses to discontent and the degree to which a relationship can be restored. Studies indeed distinguish between four major categories of responses, depending on their constructive/destructive and active/passive characters:

Figure 3: A categorization of dissatisfaction responses



As we can note here, the deterioration of a relationship can bring about a constructive or a destructive, active or passive response from any given individual. One will resort to a destructive response in cases where repair appears impossible or unwanted, whereas the recourse to a constructive response will offer larger opportunities for restoration. The customer who is involved in a deteriorating relationship may therefore resort to various strategies that can aim at restoring the relationship (loyalty or voice) or on the contrary at breaking it down (neglect or exit). Accordingly, we shall suggest that the potential for restoration diminishes as one gets closer to the exit option.

In addition, studies show that, whenever they are faced with a problem that may jeopardize the relationship, individuals will first voice their discontent, because "exit implies losing the opportunity to voice, but the reverse is not true" (Hirschman 1972). On this topic, a study conducted by Stewart (1998a) shows that 2/3 of the customers who switched to a different bank had first tried to voice their grievance, but in vain. Ping (1999) has also demonstrated that it is possible to establish some links between those four modes of response. A dissatisfied customer's first response will generally be to remain loyal, and then only will he/she voice his/her grievance if he/she feels it preferable to preserve the relationship. However, in long-term relationships, partners tend to neglect the relationship when it is about to break down. It seems possible, therefore, to conclude that the various responses can be envisaged in chronological order, exit being generally preceded by the other three responses.

The disengagement strategy

Some authors who have analysed the breakdown of business relationships have centred their studies around the dyadic stage of the ending process in order to understand what communicative (or disengaging) strategies can be implemented by the initiator of the dissolution. Their conclusions appear fundamental for our problematic, in the sense that they bring to light certain constructive strategies which favour negotiation, and other destructive strategies which will conversely lead to the breakdown. What strategy the initiator chooses to adopt will thereby influence the potential for repair by either favouring or not favouring the other party's becoming aware of the problems and by authorizing or not authorizing the arising of negotiation. Resorting to a direct and other-oriented strategy will give the partner an opportunity to react and restore the relationship. On the other hand, resorting to an indirect self-oriented strategy will result in a diminished potential for reconciliation.

Deteriorated relational characteristics

Both research in marketing and psychosociology have generally come to the conclusion that relationships are composed of various elements that are a matter of behaviour (interaction between the parties) or of psychology (perceptions). In other words, "behavioural dimensions exist as well as mental dimensions in a relationship" (Liljander and Strandvik 1995). "It is thus necessary for studies of interpersonal relationships to be concerned not only with their behavioural but also with their affective/cognitive aspects" (Hinde 1981). As a result, the fact that a relationship is deteriorating can first of all have its roots in the *cognitive sphere*. Nevertheless, "a weakening cognitive process is hard to perceive [...] This type of fading takes place in the mind of the customer and must be expressed in some way in order for the other actor(s) in the relationship to notice it" (Åkerlund 2004). The origin of the deterioration may also be related to *affective components*, and result in a lower level of satisfaction which can also come with negative emotions concerning the relationship or the partner. In that case, the dissatisfied partner will usually voice his/her emotions in order to re-establish an appropriate level of satisfaction. Then, *conative deterioration* will essentially have to do with the partners' intentions and in that sense will appear in the form of a will to act that may point toward the dissolution of the relationship. Last of all, *behavioural weakening* will be the most visible, but also the most irreversible, and will result, for example, in decreased trading or social interaction between the parties.

The deterioration of a relationship can arise as a degradation of its various components. However, the reversible character of the weakening, and consequently the potential for repair, seem conditioned by what type of weakening we consider. Indeed, the closer we get to behavioural elements, the lower the potential for repair appears to be. Thus, it would seem that behavioural elements constitute the last link in a chain of events, and that they are preceded by intentions which themselves derive from deeper psychological elements, namely the cognitive and affective components. We can therefore deduce from there that the deterioration of mental elements (the cognitive and affective components) precede that of the behavioural elements (the conative and behavioural components).

Consequently it seems clear that, from the point of view of that of the partners who is subjected to a dissolving relationship, the earlier one becomes aware of the problem, the bigger the opportunities for

repair will be. It is therefore essential to be able to detect the signal that the initiator sends out as early as possible, in order to respond before it is too late, which is to say before the dissolution process is too advanced to allow for a restoring work.

The advancement of the dissolving process

Repairing becomes necessary from the moment the relationship has entered its negative phase. Such evolution will amount to the degradation of the various components of the relationship, and will result in the weakening of the existing links between the partners. Nonetheless, it seems possible to link together the degree of advancement of the ending process and the deterioration of the various components of the relationship, the potential for repair being negatively connected to how advanced the dissolution is. If we refer to the dissolution process of relationships elaborated by Duck (1981), we realize that the affective elements (mainly satisfaction) deteriorate in the first stages of the dissolution, during the breakdown and the intrapsychic phases. At the end of this last stage, the initiator is then going to take into account the various barriers that stand on the way out (the cognitive elements) which will have an impact upon his/her decision. The initiator can then imagine resorting to various responses as envisaged by Hirschman (conative elements). That decision will remain at the level of intended action until it effectively gets implemented (behaviour).

Phase 4: Choosing a solution

Once the problem has been analysed and comprehended globally, the partner subjected to the breakdown can from then choose to examine the various strategies available. Of course, how wide the range of available strategies is will depend, on the one hand, on the conclusions drawn from the preceding stages, and on the other hand on the company's intrinsic characteristics (repairing competence, experience of dissolution, etc.). Once the various remedies conceivable at first sight have been defined, the question of the choice can be asked. That choice will depend mostly on the position in which the relationship is at the time. In that perspective, we have considered two major situations: either the relationship is still within the first stages of the dissolution process and is simply characterized by a decay of its mental components (detachment), or the ending process has reached a more advanced stage and the formal rupture is being carried out (disengagement).

We think that these two situations call for different repairing strategies, the nature of which will be more appropriate to one or the other case. Thus, communication or meta-communication strategies, or even togetherness strategies, would be more adapted to deal with mental detachment, whereas environmental strategies, routine avoidance, or the appeal to outside support, would be more appropriate to cases of behavioural restoration. Even though what strategy one will opt for depends mainly upon the conclusions drawn from the diagnosis phase, other factors can also play a role in such decision-making. Thus, the cost of each remedy, the worth of the relationship, the expected benefits, or even the means available to the company, represent so many variables bearing on that choice.

Phase 5: The effectiveness of repairing actions

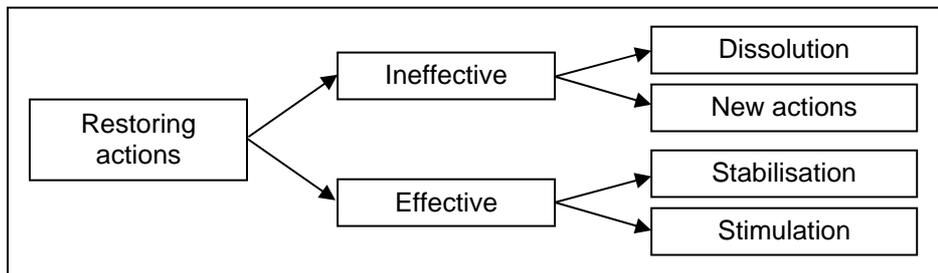
This phase has to do with the impact of the chosen strategies upon the relationship, and more precisely with how fitting they are to the problem encountered. One may indeed wonder about the impact of the chosen strategies upon the partnership and on the way their effectiveness can be judged. In order to get a clear notion of how effective those actions are, it seems necessary to look, not at how the party subjected to the breakdown perceives them, but rather at how the initiator does, since as Vaughan (1986, p. 110) has noted it, "the initiator thus becomes the decision-maker". Hence it is the initiator who will be the judge of the effectiveness of his/her partner's reactions, and not the other way around. Three cases are possible here:

First, the restoring actions can prove *ineffective*, and thus have no effect upon the dissolution process. In that case, the breakdown will take place in spite of the efforts implemented to improve the relationship.

In a second possible scenario, the actions being *entirely effective* would stop the ending process and make it possible to move on to a new positive phase. In that case, we can conceive of two possibilities: either the relationship gets stabilized at the stage at which it had arrived before it started deteriorating (stabilisation), or its intensity is boosted by the event (stimulation).

Finally, we can also imagine that the repairing actions *slow down* the dissolution process without achieving a total restoration. New actions would then be needed to restore the relationship. The various possible situations can be represented as follows:

Figure 4: The effectiveness of repairing actions



Conclusion

Research on the restoration of troubled relationships, although it has yet to develop at this point, appears fundamental if we are to better understand the phenomena related to the dissolution of relationships. A precise analysis of the repairing of dissolving relationships will bring new elements of knowledge to the general comprehension of relational dynamics. Managers could also find answers and suggestions which would make it possible for them to support the maintenance of the most vital relationships. The theoretical and managerial implications of this phenomenon therefore suggest the need to conduct further studies in that domain. Although we have based this work upon purely theoretical observations, the analytical framework we have presented here constitutes a first attempt at conceptualising the dynamics of restoration, its main objective being to explain how to avoid the dissolution of long-term partnerships.

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