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Learned Optimism in Sales Teams
An illustration of optimistic explanatory style and its application in three different contexts

Marketing

Master's thesis

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Abstract

Quantified measures of antecedents of sales organization effectiveness often fail to capture the unique contexts and qualitative aspects of sales manager behaviors. This researched gap is exemplified by using the explanatory style of a sales team as a lense to illustrate the contextual nature of managerial actions in different situations. Explanatory style was chosen as a lense because it has already been suggested to be an antecedent of sales organization effectiveness. This exemplification is done through a multiple case study where the explanatory style of the sales team and factors affecting it are described, analyzed and compared. Eight in-depth interviews from top sales teams of three different large multinational business-to-business companies were conducted.

Through emergent coding, the multiple case study produced findings which were classified under four broad themes: (1) explanatory style and attitude towards failure, (2) learning from failure, (3) leadership style and error management and (4) team atmosphere. Findings included descriptions of different approaches to collective and personal explanatory style, attitude to failure as well as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. These different approaches indicated personal differences, but also deliberate managerial decisions aiming to create an explanatory style suitable to the team's context.

The results illustrate that there is not a single "one size fits all" form of explanatory style or set of managerial actions through which to achieve it. At least this antecedent of sales organization effectiveness seems to come in different forms and needs to be sought after in diverse ways depending on context. The findings also provide a benchmark for managers against which to reflect the status of their own sales team.

Keywords explanatory style; learned optimism; sales management; sales organization effectiveness; leadership

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1 Introduction

Sales teams are often compared to professional team sports (e.g. Guenzi & Geiger 2011) in that both involve competing – against competitors and also internally – which inevitably leads to facing failure at some stage. As a sports coach, I have closely witnessed the challenge of facing adversity and trying to manage a team and its individuals so that they are not beaten down by it. In my experience, many coaches might fairly well know how to train players to reach good physical form, teach new skills and implement tactics. Some might even recognize what the characteristics for a mentally strong player are. However, the area I feel often lacks understanding or patience is how to create and support the development of cognitive capabilities and an optimal atmosphere required to overcome difficult situations.

The particular team I have coached for several years is perhaps a good example of a case where the collective has disproportionately often managed to stay optimistic in face of near-certain defeats and other adversities. Following these observations from my coaching experiences, I was interested to learn more about this phenomenon. Discussions with veteran business coach and psychologist Mr. Ilkka Heiskanen convinced me that this might be a meaningful topic also for Finnish sales organizations, which according to him often fall short by focusing strongly on process at the expense of human leadership and motivation.

This research is my attempt to examine overcoming adversity as a team and as individuals in a sales context, particularly exploring how it demonstrates itself and how it is put into practice. This section starts with a brief background on the importance of this topic in sales, adding to the background deriving from my personal experience. Next, I present my research questions and objectives followed by an overview on my research structure.

1.1 Research background

Countless sales management research articles start with mentioning the amount of failure and stress salespeople face in their profession (e.g. Dixon &

Schertzer 2005, Boichuk et al 2014). "Approximately 50% of salespeople fail to reach their annual targets" (Ahearne et al. 2012, p.39), "it is the nature of selling that even the best salespeople will fail far more often than succeed" (Schulman 1999, p. 31) and similar statistics are commonly used to emphasize the amount of rejection and failure salespeople are bound to face (e.g. Boichuk et 2014). It is evident that failure and rejection are an integral part of the sales profession, probably more so than in most others. Staying motivated and confident in this type of environment can by no means be taken for granted.

Sales organizations are sometimes described as short-sighted in that they focus above all on meeting targets (Boichuk et al 2014). Results are expected fast, adding to the pressure towards the sales team and individuals. And to a great extent, by good reason – without sales results, it is hard to justify the existence of the profession. But do managers prepare their salespeople adequately to face situations where they fail to deliver? Could there be often neglected performance potential in salespeople concerning their recovering from adverse situations that managers could be able to reinforce?

Sales management literature, particularly sales organization effectiveness research has aimed to capture factors affecting a salesperson's performance and thereby organizational level outcome (e.g. Piercy et al 1997). There is also a separate stream of literature (see e.g. Schulman 1999 for an overview) specifically discussing managing adversity in sales. In addition, coping with adversity has been discussed within the field of psychology (e.g. Hooper & McHugh 2013). As I argue later in my research, the topics of this research stream of managing adversity can be seen as partly neglected or at least insufficiently integrated into other areas sales management research, which often focus more on the content of sales or refer to very general terms such as "coaching" (Piercy et al 1997) when assessing the sales manager's role in motivation.

In general, it seems that both in professional life as well as in academia, there is a strong focus on improving sales through the skills, styles, behaviors, attitudes and orientation of salespeople as well as sales organization processes. This is where I find an analogy with team sports, where in my experience coaches

often possess impressive know-how of physical and tactical athlete development, but may struggle in understanding that athletes are humans who cannot be led only through processes. In an attempt to better integrate "mental coaching" (in the form of responding effectively to adversity) into the job description of a sales manager, this study begins with a literature review on sales organization effectiveness literature started by Piercy et al (1997). It offers a thorough conceptualization of the antecedents of sales organization effectiveness, including managerial behaviors such as coaching.

Interestingly, I find that prior sales organization effectiveness research has focused more on the quantity instead of quality of these managerial behaviors. I believe there is currently a research gap in the sales management control and salesforce behavior performance boundary of current sales organization effectiveness models, which lacks detail in explaining and describing favorable managerial behaviors.

1.2 Research question and objectives

My research problem focuses on being able to exemplify how specific and context dependent managerial actions that increase sales organization effectiveness through salesforce behavior performance actually are. Having chosen explanatory style as the lense for my study, these managerial actions would have to relate to this specific antecedent. Explanatory style can be described as the habitual way in which an individual tends to explain adversities (Schulman 1999). Therefore the research question of this thesis is:

How is a culture of optimistic explanatory style evident, created and supported in high-performing sales teams in large Finnish business-to-business companies?

In order to answer this research question I should be expected to firstly illustrate what optimistic explanatory style is in practice, i.e. how it is evident. Secondly, I should be expected to describe managerial actions and prerequisites through which a culture of optimistic explanatory is adopted, or reinforced in a sales team.

1.3 Research structure

My study begins with a thorough literature review, which has four main parts. The purpose of the first part of my literature review is to provide background on and discuss the present gap in sales organization effectiveness research. This section is important in justifying my criticism regarding the inadequate scope and the lack of qualitative considerations of managerial actions in sales organization effectiveness models. In the second part of my literature review, I take a lense through which I study this research gap: managerial actions to enhance optimistic behavior in sales teams. The purpose of this section is to form an understanding of the mechanics and dimensions of optimistic explanatory style, and how it can be used in order to create sales organization effectiveness through salesforce behavior performance. Next, I discuss the impact of learned optimism to underline its significance as an antecedent of sales organization effectiveness. Finally, I investigate leadership styles and other managerial actions that are potentially favorable to optimism. This is then used as the theoretical basis for conducting and analyzing the qualitative interviews.

Following the literature review, I justify my methodological decisions as well as the philosophical paradigm behind it and explain how the research was conducted. This involves elaborating on the chosen multiple case study method as well as going through the data collection and analysis techniques. Following this, I present the findings of my study, which aim to add understanding of *how* optimistic explanatory style can be created and enhanced within a sales team, and how such a mindset can be influenced by managerial actions. Results are then analyzed, commented, compared and discussed. Their theoretical implications are discussed in regards of providing more insight and descriptiveness to the current measures used for managerial behaviors in the management control area of sales organization effectiveness models. Managerial implications include insights of practical actions, and approaches to increase learned optimism within a sales team.

2 Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is twofold. Firstly, it introduces the current body of sales organization effectiveness literature. This part aims to discuss and explain the current research gap in the area of salesforce behavior performance and management control. In addition, it provides background on how optimistic explanatory style is linked with favorable salesforce behaviors. Secondly, extant research of optimistic explanatory style is reviewed. The objective of this examination is to define learned optimism, discuss the benefits and impact of it, gain an understanding of factors affecting it, as well as to uncover optimal leadership styles. This provides the theoretical background for discussing the implications of the results and drawing conclusions.

2.1 Sales organization effectiveness

Piercy et al (1997, p.44) define sales organization effectiveness as "the overall organizational outcome commonly measured by sales volume, profit contribution and the like". Similar definitions (e.g. Baldauf & Cravens 1999) support this notion viewing sales organization effectiveness as a measurable monetary outcome of the organization. The following sections introduce the sales organization effectiveness antecedents and models in more detail, explaining where sales organization effectiveness derives from.

2.1.1 Sales organization effectiveness framework

In the original model by Piercy et al (1997), sales organization effectiveness is correlated with salesforce outcome performance, which is the tangible outcome created by the salesforce (won and lost deals). The primary factor affecting salesforce outcome performance is salesforce behavior performance, consisting of a set of behaviors correlating to the outcomes. Salesforce behavior performance is affected by three different factors: (1) sales management control, (2) salesperson characteristics and (3) sales organization design. Out of these three, sales management control and sales organization design also have

a direct impact on salesforce outcome performance. Sales management control includes different tools and actions of a sales manager, such as coaching, evaluation or monitoring. Salesperson characteristics are exactly what they sound like – the personal and professional characteristics and skills of the salesperson. Finally, sales organization design implies how the work of the organization is designed, involving e.g. segmentation, team form or what geographical areas each team or salesperson covers.

Some conceptualizations (e.g. Barker 2001) have merged salesforce behavior performance and salesforce outcome performance into a factor called simply salesforce performance. This can be reasoned with studies showing that salesforce behavior performance is directly related to salesforce outcome performance (e.g. Cravens et al 1993, Babakus et al 1996). However, emphasizing superior salesforce behavior performance as an antecedent of outcome performance perhaps better highlights that often an improvement in the outcome is a result of the salespeople displaying more effective behaviors. Another conceptualization is provided by Grant & Cravens (1999), who illustrate that the antecedents of sales organization effectiveness fall under "sales manager" and "salesforce" categories, and are affected by the interactions between them. The sales manager category centers around the chosen sales management control systems and territory design. Sales management control systems include activities such as monitoring, directing, evaluating, rewarding, communicating and coaching. Territory design refers the focus area of an individual or team defined based on e.g. geography or market segment, and can be viewed almost interchangeably with the "sales organization design" term in the model by Piercy et al (1997). Salesforce related areas on the other hand include customer relationship strategy (closely linked to expressing customer-oriented behavior, as described by Saxe & Weitz (1982)), organizational commitment and salesforce performance (behavioral and outcome). Grant & Cravens's (1999) model uses the behavior-based control system – as opposed to outcome-based – which means the activities mentioned are assumed to directly have a positive impact on sales organization effectiveness.

There is an impressive body of empirical studies showing the correlation between sales organization effectiveness and the antecedents suggested in these models. Quantitative studies conducted in the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe have shown that the more a sales manager engages in the acts of for instance monitoring, directing (e.g. encouraging, training, discussing), evaluating and rewarding, the more effective the sales organization seems to be when measured through factors such as sales volume, market share, profitability and customer satisfaction (e.g. Piercy et al 1997, Grant & Cravens 1999, Baldauf & Cravens 1999, Barker 2001, Küster & Canales 2011). Also other antecedents where identified, relating to salesperson characteristics and organization design.

2.1.2 Managerial behaviors enhancing sales effectiveness

From a sales management control perspective, management control related antecedents (which were monitoring, directing, evaluating, rewarding) were studied based on a set of behaviors describing each antecedent. For example, Piercy et al (1997) determine a manager's level of the "directing" antecedent based on 5 activities, each of which they have evaluated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a great extent): (1) encourage salespeople to increase their sales results by rewarding them for achievements, (2) actively participate in training salespeople on the job, (3) regularly spend time coaching salespeople, (4) discuss performance evaluations with salespeople, and (5) help salespeople develop their potential. The empirical studies found that all of these activities were performed to a greater extent in highly effective sales organizations compared to less effective ones.

My main criticism towards this stream of research is that it has greatly concentrated on quantity instead of quality. For example, Piercy et al's (1997) conclusion of regular coaching as a directing activity that will positively impact salesforce performance views coaching as a quantitative scale variable (e.g. incidents, time spent) instead of a complex, unique process. In my opinion, this perspective lacks the level of detail needed to genuinely analyze and reflect on manager's actions and their contribution towards sales organization

effectiveness. If there is a great extent of attempted coaching in an organization (e.g. daily manager-salesperson encounters that could be categorized as coaching), but of poor quality (e.g. using ineffective methods or styles, performed by managers lacking the necessary coaching skills or directing towards unwanted outcomes), is regular coaching still a predictor of positive salesforce performance, and thereby sales organization effectiveness? Extant research has creditably pointed out the benefits of a sales manager performing these discussed activities. However, there seems to be a gap in describing *how* these activities (e.g. the content and style of regular coaching) can be applied beneficially.

2.2 Optimistic explanatory style

In order to dive deeper into coaching – one element of the "directing" set of managerial behaviors that were considered antecedents of sales organization effectiveness – we will use one aspect of coaching as a lense to explore the contextual significance of managerial actions: overcoming adversity. While there certainly are also other factors and elements affecting the quality of coaching (not to mention directing), drilling deeper into only one area of coaching highlights how complex of a topic it really is. If already this subarea of coaching involves as complex managerial decisions as expected, there probably are a host of other subareas which can be just as complex. This perhaps highlights how absurd it is to measure such a complex and context sensitive topic purely quantitatively. Let's take an example of how explanatory style is related to sales organization effectiveness, and assume according to extant research models (e.g. Piercy et al 1997) that regular coaching is a good predictor of sales organization effectiveness. If a sales manager regularly interacts with his employees in sessions categorized as coaching (as was the case in empirical studies of e.g. Piercy et al 1997), but during these occasions encourages pessimistic explanatory style, can we still hold on to the same assumption?

This section will first review the learned helplessness and optimism concepts, as well as discuss their effects and different interpretations. Next, learned

optimism will be tied into the sales organization literature by explaining mechanisms through which it affects sales effectiveness. Finally, in an attempt to define favorable managerial actions, I will discuss how learned optimism can be used most effectively, as well as describe favorable leadership styles. The purpose of this review is to more specifically understand what sales managers should or could be doing in order to encourage and enhance optimistic explanatory style in their sales teams. It will later be used as a reference point in conducting and analyzing the interviews carried out in this research.

2.2.1 Learned helplessness and optimism

Learned helplessness could be described as a self-fulfilling prophecy, implying that someone who feels that their actions have little control over an objective will unlikely strive to make an effort to achieve this objective (Seligman 1975). Seligman (2011) has described the mechanism of learned helplessness through an experiment he conducted, where subjects were exposed to an annoying noise which some could turn off by pressing a button and others couldn't. When repeating the situation so that all subjects could turn off the noise, most of those he previously didn't give the chance to do so wouldn't, because they had learned that they are helpless in the situation. While in general learned helplessness implies a lack of effort due to the belief that an individual does not have control (Seligman 1975), it has multiple negative consequences when taken a closer look at. Referring to extant learned helplessness research, Schulman (1999) suggests the three psychological consequences of learned helplessness to be

1. loss of motivation
2. anxiety and lower self-esteem
3. reluctance to accept that the person in fact has control over an objective, even despite proof suggesting so

First introduced by Seligman (1990), learned optimism can be viewed as a counter-mechanism of learned helplessness – in other words a self-fulfilling prophecy of success. Learned optimism and helplessness are the opposite ends of explanatory style, which Schulman (1999, p. 32) describes as "the

habitual way that an individual explains setbacks and failures". This choice of explanatory style when confronting adversity will then greatly impact how the individual will see their chances of affecting the outcome of the situation with their own actions. Schulman (1999) linked learned optimism more specifically with the sales context, after which a significant stream of academic research has emerged on the subject.

2.2.2 Dimensions of learned optimism

According to Schulman (1999) there are three dimensions of an explanation: (1) how stable or unstable the cause is, (2) how global or specific the implications are and (3) is the cause external or internal. The stable/unstable dimension refers to how long-lasting the cause of adversity is thought to be. An unstable cause is something that is expected to diminish over time naturally or through an individual's personal effort (e.g. "I am a loser" is a stable explanation as it is a personal characteristic that is not expected to change). The global/specific dimension examines how broad of an impact the adversity might have. "I suck" would be an example of a global explanation for currently insufficient skills to win over a customer, whereas "I am bad at closing deals" is more specific (Schulman 1999). Finding a specific cause for failure gives the salesperson the possibility to learn from the adversity and do something different in the future to avoid or overcome that specific cause. The third dimension of explanation is how internal (self-inflicted) or external the cause of the event is in the individual's mind. "I failed to convince the customer to buy" is for instance more internal than "the customer didn't want my product" – the latter moving the blame from the salesperson to the customer (Schulman 1999). According to Schulman (1999), attributing failure to external causes can help the salesperson to recover from the disappointment and move on, instead of spending time feeling bad for not succeeding. Schulman (1999) suggests that individuals who tend to explain adversity in stable, global and internal ways are more prone to learned helplessness than individuals with unstable, specific and external explanations for the same events – which is referred to as learned optimism, or optimistic explanatory style. Optimists don't necessarily always explain

adversity in all of these ways, but in general tend to lean to this direction within the three dimensions. It is also important to note that the purpose of learned optimism is not to avoid taking responsibility and accountability for your own actions, but rather avoid unnecessary self-pity or punishment.

However, despite Schulman (1999) cautioning to not understand learned optimism as an avoidance technique to mask the cause of adversity, the third dimension does involve a problem. As criticized by Sujan (1999) – who refers to the attributional theory of motivation and emotion by Weiner (1986) – the global/specific and stable/unstable dimensions do impact future expectations, while the internal/external dimension does not. Sujan (1999) points out that attributing the cause of an adversity to an external source is beneficial only if the condition is stable. When neglecting a proper analysis of the reason for adversity (which could possibly be internal), Sujan (1999) notes that possibilities for learning and development are missed. In this sense, explaining adversity with external reasons by default can be seen as some kind of self-esteem protecting mechanism, instead of a truly optimistic attitude. As an example, Sujan (1999) uses long-term effort (an internal and stable attribution) and luck (an external and unstable attribution) to illustrate this fault in Schulman's (1999) learned optimism paradigm. If an adversity resulting from someone's long-term effort (e.g. doing the wrong things in their work) is deemed as a result of external causes such as luck, the person will not be able to reassess their behavior and emotions. However, if the adversity is in fact caused by unstable conditions such as unfavorable personal preferences of a specific customer, explaining the situation with internal reasons (such as long-term effort) will probably not produce important learnings that would outweigh the negative effect on motivation. Another comment by Sujan (1999) concerning the learned optimism paradigm is that Schulman (1999) has not taken a stand on the relative impact of each dimension. Sujan (1999) predicts that the stability over time (stable/unstable) dimension has a significantly greater impact on optimistic behavior than the internal/external or global/specific dimensions.

More recent research has viewed the learned optimism paradigm from a slightly different perspective. Dixon & Schertzer (2005) use the locus of causality (the internal/external dimension), stability (the unstable/stable dimension) and

controllability as the dimensions of causal attributions. In this model, Schulman's (1999) dimension of global/specific is replaced by controllability. Moreover, Dixon & Schertzer (2005) take an opposite stand to Schulman (1999) and partially even Sujan (1999) regarding the locus of causality. While Schulman (1999) suggests that individuals explaining adversity with internal causes are more prone to learned helplessness and Sujan (1999) criticizes Schulman's (1999) idea but does not suggest an alternative generalization, Dixon & Schertzer (2005) believe attributing adversity to internal causes (such as lack of effort) is characteristic not to helpless, but optimistic individuals. They use the argument that optimists expect success in general, and therefore view adversity not as failure but an opportunity to learn on the way to reaching the goal.

However, Dixon & Schertzer (2005) also do admit that attributing failure to an internal cause may also be very stressful, as it might lead to an individual beating themselves down as described by Schulman (1999). This again is an important point because it could be seen as one of the key benefits of optimism – recovering quickly from failure so that the salesperson can effectively continue doing his job without additional negative thoughts affecting self-confidence. On the other hand, Dixon & Schertzer's (2005) stance is supported by Sujan's (1999) thought of it being crucial for an individual to be able to objectively analyze his own actions critically and learn from them. As Schulman (1999) points out, the purpose of learned optimism is not to protect self-esteem, which is something that should be developed and enhanced through other means. Although strongly agreeing with the necessity of self-reflection and therefore the need for internal attribution, I find that this third dimension is not easily generalizable. Therefore the next section of this literature review will take a closer look at how the internal/external dimension could be dealt with.

2.2.3 Cognitive defusion explaining the locus of causality

While according to Deacon et al (2011) some researchers (e.g. Eifert & Forsyth 2005) have viewed attempting to suppress or avoid negative thoughts as beneficial, another school of thought known as the third wave in acceptance

and commitment therapy (ACT) have instead suggested methods such as cognitive defusion to successfully process unwanted thoughts (e.g. Hayes 2004, Deacon et al 2011, Hooper & McHugh 2013). According to Hooper & McHugh (2013), purposefully avoiding or altering negative thought content could actually lead to an increase in its presence. In their experiment, individuals exposed to cognitive defusion techniques accomplished their tasks more successfully than others using avoidance or control to process unwanted negative thoughts. Cognitive defusion involves an individual distancing themselves from negative thoughts, so that they are viewed only as possibilities that should be investigated instead of the actual state of affairs (Hooper & McHugh 2013). This allows to process these negative thoughts in a more neutral manner. Hooper & McHugh (2013) refer to Healy et al's (2008) experiment showing that defused thoughts cause less distress and are less convincing, where the phrases "I am a bad person" and "I am having the thought that I am a bad person" were used to exemplify the difference between a non-defused and defused thought. The latter being the defused version of the former, it does not directly imply that the thought in question is true, but only acknowledges the presence of such a thought.

This is an interesting research stream from the perspective of the internal/external dimension of optimism, since it relates to how negative feelings should be processed, which could naturally occur when attributing failure to internal, personal reasons. As previously discussed, extant research (e.g. Schulman 1999, Sujan 1999, Dixon & Schertzer 2005) has disagreed over the locus of causality (i.e. the internal/external dimension) of learned optimism, having differing points of view on whether it is beneficial to develop a tendency of attributing failure to internal or external causes. ACT theory could be interpreted to support Dixon & Schertzer's (2005) view in that attributing adversity to internal causes might be beneficial. This interpretation can be argued by referencing to e.g. Hooper & McHugh's (2013) experiment, which concludes that people accomplish their tasks more effectively when facing and processing negative thoughts rather than avoiding them. An abundancy of attributing failures to external causes could similarly be paralleled with avoidance (a less effective technique). The two terms do have a difference, with

external locus of causality referring to any external reason (e.g. luck) while avoidance turns the negative internal statement into positive in order to distract the mind from facing it (e.g. turning "I am not good enough" into "I am perfect", as used in an example by Hooper & McHugh (2013)). However, both share the feature of attempting to hide the real cause of adversity and offer a somewhat unreasoned explanation instead, in order to prevent the negative thoughts from making the person feel bad. Likewise, both techniques also seem to prevent an individual from being able to objectively analyze and learn from the adversity in question, while the focus is on the protection of self-esteem.

Resulting from the above discussion, this research considers that the explanatory style of learned optimism should be considered to be (very similarly to Dixon & Schertzer's (2005) view regarding the third dimension while the two first dimensions agreeing with Schulman's (1999) original idea):

1. Unstable instead of stable
2. Specific instead of global or general
3. Internal instead of external; however with a focus on objectively analyzing the locus of causality e.g. through cognitive defusion

2.3 Impact of optimistic and helpless behavior

Two important sources for helpless behavior, as introduced already by Seligman (1975), are pessimism and repetitive failures over which the person in question doesn't believe he has control. A direct link of this notion to sales organization effectiveness research is e.g. Seligman & Schulman's (1986) finding of pessimistic newly hired salespeople selling 35% less and being twice as prone to quit their job during their first two years of employment compared to the optimists. This underlines a clear link between salesforce behavior performance (optimistic behavior instead of pessimistic) and sales organization effectiveness (measured often according to sales volume, as suggested by e.g. Piercy et al (1997)). According to Schulman (1999) these results can be replicated across many different industries, such as telecommunications, real estate, office products, auto sales and banking, with sales people with an

optimistic explanatory style outselling pessimists by around 20 to 40 percent. These findings give reason to suggest a generalization that optimistic explanatory style increases sales organization effectiveness through improved salesforce outcome performance (in this example measures being sales volume and length of employment).

In addition to acknowledging that learned optimism has a favorable effect on salesforce outcome performance, it is important to examine the mechanism through which these results are attained, i.e. impact on salesforce behavior performance. More recently, e.g. Boichuk et al (2014) and Dixon et al (2003) have linked helplessness to sales-oriented behaviors, especially with inexperienced salespeople. These refer to short-term oriented sales activities (e.g. using pressure to make a sale), which are generally considered less effective and beneficial as opposed to customer-oriented activities conceptualized in Saxe & Weitz's (1982) sales orientation-customer orientation (SOCO) scale. Following Saxe & Weitz (1982), sales organization effectiveness research (e.g. Piercy et al 1997, Grant & Cravens 1999, Barker 2001) also considers customer-oriented sales behavior to be a favorable factor regarding salesforce behavioral performance. Avoiding helplessness and thereby sales-oriented behaviors is pursued by both learned optimism and sales organization effectiveness research, which supports the idea that optimistic explanatory style indeed has a positive effect on sales organization effectiveness. Whereas Seligman & Schulman (1986) and Schulman (1999) have linked optimistic explanatory style with salesforce outcome performance (sales volume), Boichuk et al's (2014) findings suggest a correlation with salesforce behavior performance.

This evidence suggests that optimism leads to improved salesperson behavior and outcome performance adding to the findings of multiple empirical studies linking these two performance elements as antecedents of sales organization effectiveness (e.g. Piercy et al 1997, Baldauf & Cravens 1999, Grant & Cravens 1999). As Schulman (1999) suggests, one implication of the benefits of optimistic explanatory style is that sales organizations should consider it when recruiting. While this surely is an important aspect, it is equally important to acknowledge that *learned* optimism is something that can be adopted. This

study is particularly interested in understanding how sales managers can influence individuals and teams to adopt or reinforce the use of optimistic explanatory style. This perspective will add to the current sales organization effectiveness research by providing more insight on the managerial actions which are used to describe favorable behaviors in the sales management control element of sales organization effectiveness models.

2.4 Sales manager role in enhancing optimistic explanatory style

While the previous chapters of this literature review have discussed what optimistic explanatory style is, how it is most effectively applied and its impact and linkage to sales organization effectiveness, the next section will provide a more practical managerial perspective. The purpose is to reflect what a sales manager can do in order to favorably affect the adoption and reinforcement of learned optimism within their sales team. Leadership style, attitude towards errors and feedback style will all be assessed from this perspective.

2.4.1 Transformational leadership

Boichuk et al (2014) refer to MacKenzie et al (2001) and Schwepker & Good (2010) in concluding that core transformational leadership is a prominent way of leading in the sales profession, as opposed to transactional leadership. Although the two styles are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, one is usually clearly the dominant. Exceptional leaders have been noted to stand out through their transformational leadership capabilities (MacKenzie et al 2001). Leaders applying transformational leadership style influence through a process of internalization and identification, while transactional leadership relies on instrumental compliance (MacKenzie et al 2001). The behaviors associated with the two styles also differ. Podsakoff et al (1996) note that there are slightly different definitions of core transformational leadership, but generally it is viewed as 1) the manager articulating a future vision, 2) showing example in how to reach that vision, and 3) fostering the acceptance of group goals and providing individual support. According to Podsakoff et al (1996), effective

transformational leaders are able to change employee attitudes and values so that they are willing to do more than minimum expectations. Transactional leadership on the other hand is focused on contingent reward and punishment (MacKenzie et al 2001), i.e. expressing approval or criticism towards employee behaviors or results.

Boichuk et al (2014) explain what this approach could mean in practice by applying transformational leadership to the context of newly hired salespeople. They suggest providing a clear roadmap to reaching sales goals, teaching new hires how to sell, and enhancing a team atmosphere where nobody is left behind. Although this sounds like a feasible plan, they bring up an important question: how does the aspect of repetitive failure affect the effectiveness of such a leadership style? The failure prone nature of sales definitely sets an additional leadership challenge, since setbacks might create a feeling of not progressing towards the articulated vision or perhaps the exemplified behaviors do not seem to work expectedly, inhibiting positive reinforcement. Therefore, if salespeople are repeatedly exposed to failure, it will undoubtedly have an effect on the credibility of transformational leadership.

Boichuk et al (2014) find that while the first failures a salesperson faces might not result in significant negative behavioral or attitudinal effects, repeated failure will affect their perceived task difficulty. After experiencing over and over again that the example behavior does not result in the desired outcome (vision), the salesperson could well start to feel cumulating pressure for not being able to produce expected results. This in turn will increase the amount of helpless behaviors – in practice showing as sales-oriented behaviors instead of customer oriented ones – as the salesperson attempts to somehow overcome the perceived difficulty of their situation (Boichuk et al 2014). Especially inexperienced salespeople are prone to fall into this spiral (Dixon et al 2003). In conclusion, Boichuk et al (2014) find that transformational leadership alone is ineffective in situations of repetitive failure, although it otherwise is a very suitable style for sales managers.

2.4.2 Error management to enhance transformational leadership

As suggested by Sujan (1999), stability can be considered the most significant dimension of learned helplessness. Boichuk et al (2014) use this assumption in tackling the challenge of applying transformational leadership style to sales. After all, accumulation of similar failures can be viewed as evidence that the reasons for failure are stable or at least long-term. They note that perceived task difficulty especially is a stable cause of adversity. Boichuk et al (2014) find that the key to successfully applying transformational leadership in sales is moderating perceived task difficulty through managerial actions – more precisely error management. Contradictory to classic learning and training theorists, error management theory views errors as a natural by-product of active learning (Keith & Frese 2008). Employees are encouraged to make errors and learn from them, instead of pursuing an error-free learning environment, as promoted by Bandura (1986).

Keith & Frese (2008) view error management as an efficient and minimal guidance learning technique. The learning facilitated through error management could already help raise the probability of succeeding after a string of failures, as the learning technique supports the salesperson in enhancing their skills (Boichuk et al 2014). Boichuk et al (2014) also refer to Hughes et al (2013) who find that error management also increases learner-controlled practice difficulty, which refers to the learner's possibilities to affect task difficulty. This was found to further enhance learning. In addition to error management being an effective tool for learning how to succeed in the future, Boichuk et al (2014) emphasize that the positive framing of errors also helps decrease the shock factor of performance failure. This could be seen as something that prolongs and restores the credibility of transformational leadership, as the negative experience of each failure is less significant. As the perceived task focus is more on learning than producing immediate results, the salesperson will also less likely practice sales-oriented behaviors than they would under larger performance pressure.

Boichuk et al (2014) recommend combining error management with transformational leadership in order to enhance learned optimism in salespeople. They suggest that the two styles complement each other so that

error management could be used to restore the effectiveness of transformational leadership in the later stages of repeated failure. In other words, positive framing of errors will enhance to the credibility of transformational leadership from the salesperson's perspective, causing them to more likely be engaged with the wanted behaviors, as they are not as easily distracted from the right path by short-term performance pressures. While Boichuk et al (2014) and Keith & Frese (2008) mainly talk about autonomous learning through error management – referring to minimal guidance – I also hypothesize that managers could have a role in this process by intervening through e.g. coaching in the error management phase. In addition to just promoting the positive aspects of failure, managers could in some situations be sparring salespeople in finding the source of failure and guiding them towards a solution. Finally, Boichuk et al (2014) also suggest that errors might often be the result of already helpless behavior. If a salesperson is already in the spiral of sales oriented behavior and repeated failures, a more experienced colleague or manager might well have the credibility needed to restore belief in a certain goal and behavior style, compared to processing the situation completely independently. Therefore error management should consider both independent learning through failures as well as managerial direction in some situations to restore the salesperson's faith into the vision and behaviors articulated through transformational leadership.

2.4.3 Feedback style

In general, it has been found that both positive and negative feedback contribute to salesperson behavior and outcome performance through role clarity. Positive feedback also had a positive direct affect towards both behavior and outcome performance, which was not the case with negative feedback. A manager giving positive rather than negative feedback to salespeople can therefore be seen as generally more effective (Jaworski & Kohl 1991). Whereas Jaworski & Kohli (1991) examined how managerial feedback to salespeople affects outcome and behavioral performance both directly and through role clarity, it is more relevant for this research to discuss how feedback affects

salesperson outcome and behavioral performance through influencing or reinforcing optimistic explanatory style. In other words, what elements should managers consider in their feedback for it to support a mindset of learned optimism?

Harmon et al (2002) have explored sales managers' feedback in situations where failure is attributed to poor strategy or insufficient effort. These can be seen as attributions typical of optimistic explanatory style as they are specific, unstable and internal. Sujan (1986) suggests that when failure is attributed to strategy, salespeople are likely to work smarter – i.e. use a different, better strategy – while in cases where effort is seen as the cause of failure, they tend to work harder but not necessarily smarter. The manager must therefore assess which cause is in question when giving feedback. Harmon et al's (2002) findings perhaps explain the means of how this feedback is given in these cases, as managers attributing failure to strategy opted for positive feedback, while negative feedback was preferred in situations when failure was attributed to insufficient effort. These findings do not directly answer how feedback should be formulated in order to encourage optimistic explanatory style. All in all, there isn't an impressive body of literature discussing managerial feedback style in relation to learned optimism. Hypothetically, Jaworski & Kohli's (1991) finding of positive feedback being more effective than negative could give reason to speculate whether managers characterized by optimistic explanatory style give more positive feedback. Although positive feedback and learned optimism are not synonyms, it could be assumed that through the example managers set in their style of feedback they might be able to pass on their mindset of positive thinking.

2.5 Conclusion of literature review

This literature review first discussed sales organization effectiveness and challenged the generalized measures used to describe coaching activities. One particular coaching activity, managerial actions affecting optimistic explanatory style, was further investigated. Explanatory style was concluded to consist of three different dimensions: stable/unstable, global/specific and external/internal.

Learned optimism was seen to lean towards unstable and specific attributions, however there were differing views in extant research concerning the third dimension. ACT theory and cognitive defusion research was used to support the idea that mostly internal attributions are characteristic to optimism, with focus on an objective analysis of the actual reason. Next favorable managerial styles were assessed, concluding that transformational leadership combined with error management might be the most suitable approach to supporting optimistic explanatory style in sales teams.

3 Methodology

The next section introduces the methodological decisions of my study. It begins with explaining my chosen philosophical paradigm – critical realism – which has important consequences for other methodological choices. Next, the use of multiple case studies as the research method is explained and justified along with decisions concerning sampling. I also elaborate on the practicalities of the research and describe proceedings related to the data collection and data analysis phases of my study.

3.1 Paradigm

The philosophical paradigm for this study is critical realism. Emphasizing the need for the following section explaining my chosen paradigm, Easton (2010) criticizes the general lack of philosophical paradigm definition of business-to-business research, especially in case studies. Moreover, Peters (2013) emphasizes the importance of ontological and epistemological decisions, arguing that by neglecting these questions our knowledge of business-to-business marketing topics may suffer from superficiality. Therefore I believe it is important to reflect on my choice of philosophical paradigm and why I have chosen critical realism.

Easton (2010) argues that critical realism seems ideally matched to case research, although accepting that interpretivism is still somewhat relevant

compared to pure positivism. In addition, critical realism doesn't only provide justification for using a case study as the research method, it also provides guidelines for doing so. Above all, I justify my choice of paradigm with a critical realist perspective best supporting the chosen research phenomenon and the type of findings I aim to produce. According to Peters et al (2013, p. 345), a characteristic of critical realism is that "events are explained by postulating and identifying the mechanisms that might be capable of producing them". In other words, the truth is considered to be somewhere there, but because it is not easy to apprehend, the analysis and findings will focus on speculation of possible causes (Easton 2010). For this study, it means e.g. assuming that the explanatory style of teams and individuals has developed through certain causal factors (such as personal characteristics, managerial actions and interpersonal communication). The truth of these causes is so complex and multi-level that the goal is not to come up with a definitive answer. However, reflecting on possible explanations and bringing up individual observations with the support of prior theory is considered valuable in itself.

3.2 Research method

Case studies are suitable for gaining an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of a specific phenomenon (Easton 2010). With my research question I am aiming to build a deeper understanding of the specific phenomenon of optimistic explanatory style in sales teams, which would thereby be supported by a case study perspective. This research goal could probably have been investigated also through a single case study, but I have decided to opt for a multiple case study consisting of three different comparative cases. Firstly, I believe this will better highlight the uniqueness of context. I argued earlier that extant sales organization effectiveness literature has partly neglected the importance of context through overt generalizations, which I attempt to exemplify in my findings. Secondly, a multiple case study method not only made it possible to assess managerially interesting findings and comparisons within cases, but also between them. Finally, from a practical point of view, gaining access to a sufficient sample from one single sales team proved challenging. Companies

were significantly more willing to provide a few interviews than having their whole sales department commit to the study. Through a multiple case study method I was able to target the most relevant and appropriate people from the company so that the sample selection supported my original idea of studying individuals in the company's most high-performing teams.

Baxter & Jack (2008) use the following list to summarize the prerequisites for using a case study method:

1. The study aims to answer "how" or "why" questions
2. The researcher cannot manipulate the research subjects' behavior
3. Contextual conditions want to be uncovered due to their relevancy to the studied phenomenon
4. The boundaries between the subject and the context are not clear

The first condition is quite clear as this study has a "how" research question. Being involved in the interview situation always affects the construction of knowledge and sense-making, so pure objectivity is not therefore possible. Therefore I will most probably affect the research subject's behavior in some way – if not otherwise, at least unconsciously with the wordings and choices of interview questions. However, keeping the focus on how the interviewee makes sense of the situation, I believe my presence cannot be counted as intended manipulating of the results. I tried not to lead the subjects to a certain direction with predefined definitions, but concentrated on their perception of the topic. This is exemplified in the following passage where the interviewee asked for a definition of failure, to which I responded that I am interested in the subjective feeling of failure experienced by the interviewee (as opposed to a having an objective idea of what is failure), asking the interviewee to treat anything he personally considers failure as the definition:

"[Laughter] well, in that sense I would hope to get a clearer definition of it [failure]… or else this topic is going to be awfully broad…" –B1

"This is a subjective concept here… I am interested in when a salesperson has a feeling of failure, what kinds of things are involved so it's maybe more your own feeling which is the best [definition]." –Interviewer

In addition, contextual conditions are at the very focus in understanding the phenomenon of optimism in sales teams. In my literature review, I challenged the simplification on complex managerial actions into quantified generalizations that to some extent neglect context and content. This means I have the burden of proof in this study to highlight the significance of context. Therefore I believe that understanding the subjects in relation to their context is imperative, since one of my main theoretical arguments is that the content and quality of these managerial actions should be examined within their unique context – not as generalizable behaviors.

3.2 Sampling

Baxter & Jack (2008) highlight that in a multiple case study it is of utmost importance that effort is put into case selection so that similar or contrasting results across cases can be predicted based on a theory. In my multiple case study I have decided to choose cases in which I would expect to predict somewhat similar results across cases. The similarity in this case arises from the cases being from extremely high-performing business-to-business sales teams. As described in my literature review, optimism has been linked to higher performance in sales teams (e.g. Seligman & Schulman 1986; Schulman 1999). In addition, my theoretical arguments are strongly linked to sales organization effectiveness literature, as I am treating coaching and leadership related managerial behaviors that enhance optimistic explanatory style as antecedents of sales organization effectiveness (through salesforce behavior performance). Therefore I believe that studying high-performing teams and individuals is interesting for this research, since I am looking to describe antecedents of effective performance. It could also be anticipated that managers of more effective teams might have a higher probability of positively contributing to the

adoption of optimistic explanatory style within their team. Naturally, their high performance does not guarantee favorable managerial behaviors concerning optimism, but could help in finding a sample of more interesting cases that will produce some examples of such actions.

The sales teams selected for this study are from three large, Finnish business-to-business companies that operate internationally. When approaching the companies with a request to conduct interviews with their salespeople, I specifically asked for the interviewees to be from one of their top performing sales teams. In two cases, I interviewed the manager of the sales team in question as well as two other team members in order to gain a holistic view of the team. In the third case, I interviewed two individuals with a sales manager type role in a matrix organization. Importantly, I was also interested in comparing findings within the cases (whether the sales manager and salesperson from the same team experienced the themes similarly) in addition to comparing results between the cases. I believe this is an important triangulation in validating the quality of managerial actions and leadership style of the sales manager, but also a way of emphasizing that the actions of the same manager in the same team might have different outcomes between different salespeople.

With a sample of three cases of which two (A and B) consist of three in-depth interviews each and one (C) consisting of two in-depth interviews – eight altogether – I do not intend to create generalizable results or form a new theory. In qualitative research the point of saturation has been regarded as an acceptable sample size, which will greatly vary depending on the chosen methodology and research type (Mason 2010). The whole data set of eight interviews produced data from clearly recurring themes, largely repeating the same phenomena perhaps from slightly different angles. In this sense I concluded that the point of saturation might have been reached. On a single case level, three (or two) in-depth interviews can be considered a relatively small sample size, especially since the interviews were the primary data source (no supporting research was done). Then again, the interest of this study is in how these individuals experience and describe the phenomenon in question. Therefore the relatively small sample size is justifiable, as it offers sufficient

data for the needs of this comparative multiple case study, which aims to describe optimistic explanatory style in a few different contexts. Further interviews might have brought added value to this study, but even with this sample size per company, distinct characteristics emerged for each case. In that way, there was triangulation in the sense that interviews from different people in the same company verified each other's messages instead of being completely contradictory. Perhaps the only exception perhaps to this was Company C, which would have benefitted from additional interviews as the two respondents had contradicting views in some areas.

3.3 Data collection

The semi-structured interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews with the exception of interviewees B1 and BM, who were interviewed by phone due to convenience reasons. The face-to-face interviews were held at the interviewees' offices in a meeting room, one at a time. The interviewees were briefly informed in beforehand of the subject of the interview and some other practical details, however they were not asked to prepare for the interview in any way. The identities of the interviewees and their companies have been agreed to remain concealed in order to protect their privacy and business confidentiality. Due to the preference of the participants, the interviews were conducted in Finnish. They were recorded and then transcribed, also in Finnish. The excerpts from the interviews used in this study have however been translated to English, with the utmost effort of retaining the original message and even using a literal translation when it made sense.

In addition to the interviews producing the raw data for this study, two other in-depth interviews of around 2 hours each were conducted at the early stages of the research with Mr. Ilkka Heiskanen and Mr. Risto Kalske, who both have whom have decades of sales management experience. The former from management consulting as well as recruiting and coaching contemporary sales and marketing methods; the latter from building winning sales teams and holding executive positions in high-tech industry business-to-business companies. The purpose of these preliminary interviews was to gain insights,

inspiration and a general overview of the challenges related to the topic. These interviews provided an insightful perspective into formulating interview themes and prompt questions for the actual study. Also, the interview with Mr. Ilkka Heiskanen acted as the preliminary iteration round in testing the interview structure as well as a chance to practice interviewing. I believe this improved the quality of the actual interviews both in content and execution. According to Mason (2010) the skill of the interviewer clearly affects the quality of the sample collected, subsequently leading to saturation in the data sooner.

After the preliminary interviews, the interview structure and outline were finalized. However, after the first three interviews the outline was modified into its final form. One of the first interviews lasted for only about 20 minutes, and was not quite as rich in detail as expected. Therefore additional prompts were added and the outline was tailored so that a more deep-diving interview result was more probable regardless of the level of the interviewees' proactivity towards discussing the topics thoroughly. The remaining interviews lasted longer and above all produced more detailed and relevant findings, suggesting the remodeling paid off. The eight interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, with a typical length of 35-40 minutes. They resulted in 104 pages of transcribed text in Finnish. The final interview outline which was used after the reiteration rounds (including prompting questions and themes) can be found in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. Two slightly differing outlines were used to cover the sales manager and salesperson roles.

3.4 Data analysis

This study uses qualitative content analysis in which individual themes are used as the unit of analysis, representing expressions of an idea (Zhang & Wildemuth 2009). I chose inductive content analysis because there was no prior theory based on which suitable categories could be formulated. Having said this, I recognize that some of the theories of my literature review could have possibly been used to group answers (e.g. the three aspects of learned optimism), but being interested in understanding and describing these unique situations, I was more keen on seeing what might arise from the data. Therefore, emergent

coding was used to label passages of transcribed text that marked for an interesting theme related to the research topic. According to Zhang & Wildemuth (2009), constant comparison between categories should be done when using the inductive method. Through constant comparison each labeled text passage was systematically compared to other texts within the same category, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of that category. The cases were hence analyzed depending on their properties within each identified category.

In practice, I went through the transcribed text immediately after the interview. I looked for interesting individual themes, topics and observations in the text, and highlighted these passages with different color codes. Going through the transcripts I started noticing more examples of recurring themes, or themes that where somehow related to the previous ones. I then constantly molded the names of these theme categories into umbrella terms that would capture the essence of the different points, while simultaneously providing a logical way to categorize the findings. I grouped all of the example passages related to each theme in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, labeling them according to theme, interviewee and company. This way it was possible to analyze the passages according to theme but also practice constant comparison between cases, helping to gain an understanding of how the themes would show in slightly different ways depending on the context (sales team). Finally, the categories could be condensed to fall under four umbrella themes.

4 Findings

Before going into the findings of this research, it is worthwhile reminding what the objective was. The research question I have attempted to answer was:

How is a culture of optimistic explanatory style evident, created and supported in high-performing sales teams in large Finnish business-to-business companies?

In order to answer this question, my findings should be expected to provide an illustration on what optimistic explanatory style demonstrates itself in practice, as well as explore factors that enable and fortify this kind of behavior in sales teams. I was delighted to have insightful and open interviewees who produced a host of interesting comments from which to select excerpts to support my analysis. Selection naturally needs to be applied when picking which examples to use, but I have deliberately attempted to enrich my analysis by including several rather than too few quotes from the interviews, since I believe they are truly interesting and bring the largest value to the reader – at times summing up the point even better than my own analysis.

In this section, I will introduce my interpretations of the findings for each case based on the emergent coding and comparison techniques used. The purpose is to illustrate how the different themes were evident in each sales team and what kinds of attitudes, leadership styles and practices seemed to be in place in each team. I also comment on the findings and attempt to analyze them using the theories presented in my literature review. Through emergent coding, four general themes were identified to which most of the topics could be associated with: (1) explanatory style of the individuals and teams including attitude towards winning and losing, (2) attitude to learning from failure, (3) leadership style including error management and managerial attitude towards errors, and finally (4) team atmosphere as a supporting or enabling element of learned optimism. The following section is structured based on these themes. Each case company is presented, starting with a brief background about the company and interviewees to give the reader a better understanding of the context, which certainly can be considered to affect the results. The findings of the case company are then presented and analyzed according to the four themes.

4.1 Case company A

Company A is a large, globally operating mainly business-to-business company offering a few technical everyday products and services to maintain these

products. It has a very strong position in Finland and is globally among the top four industry leaders, having tens of thousands of employees worldwide with an annual turnover in "the billions" category. The market is traditionally rather price sensitive and the company's products are rarely among the cheapest compared to competitors. Especially Finland's economic drought during recent years has affected the price consciousness of customers:

"It is unfortunate how much the price has affected now… At this moment, in this market where we are living, you could say that times are quite tough." –AS2

From Company A, I interviewed three individuals. The local front line's sales director referred to as AM ("A Manager") was interviewed first. He had a manager role as he was heading a sales team of around 10 people. Interviewees A1 and A2 were salespeople from that team, so they were direct subordinates to AM. All of these individuals were approximately in their thirties and had extensive sales experience, i.e. the sample did not include rookie sales people. Individual deals in their industry could range from very small repairs, modernizations or single product sales –typically worth some thousands of euros – to rarer megadeals over the million euro mark where a comprehensive set of equipment and services was provided to a large customer. Therefore the deal size range could be quite large at times, but the nature of sales was that there was a large number of smaller deals the salespeople were typically focusing on. This is possibly an important detail to keep in mind when comparing this company case to the other two.

4.1.1 Explanatory style

One of the most interesting themes that came up with Company A's case was the explanatory style of the interviewees – or my interpretation of it based on the interviews. This was interesting because of two reasons. Firstly, there seemed to be a gap between the sales manager's and salespeople's explanatory styles, especially regarding internal and external attribution of failure. Secondly, the pricing element as an external and stable attribution of failure was underpinned. Each of the three interviewees brought up price – as in competitors being too cheap – as the primary explanation for losing deals. If you

consider the following excerpts keeping in mind the three dimensions of optimism, you can interpret that the reasons actually fill all the criteria of pessimistic explanatory style (Schulman 1999, Sujan 1999, Dixon & Schertzer 2005) being rather general instead of specific ("usually", "most of the time"), external instead of internal ("it doesn't matter how you do your work", "price") and stable instead of unstable (it isn't probable that price competition in this industry will suddenly cease):

"Usually it's just the price… It's unfortunate how much the price has now [affected]." –A2

"*Most of the time it's only price that counts, unfortunately… it's quite unfortunate that, perhaps sometimes it doesn't even matter how you do your own work and how well you do your sales, sales work. I've been told many times that we would want to buy from you but the products are too expensive.*" –A1

"…actually it [internal attributions] usually isn't even the answer… there could be something else in the background like purely just price." – AM

Giving price such a strong attribution can be interpreted in different ways. It is impossible to be completely objective and know for sure how decisive price is among the customer's preference criteria. Surely it is important, especially in this market since it was described as commoditized and price sensitive. However, such an external, stable and general reason (in this case something that the salesperson feels they cannot affect in any way) and especially the interviewees' reactions to this reason imply that it perhaps involves some degree of learned helplessness. Comments such as "it doesn't even matter how you do your own work" (A1) support this notion. Having a firm belief that price almost always explains losing the deal might be a barrier to uncovering ways in which the deal could be influenced even if the price is higher than competition. Finding the right attribution to failure is surely challenging in these cases because price is in fact more of an issue than in many other cases, but attributing most failure to an external reason might lead to helpless behaviors,

prohibit learning from failure, and neglecting alternative, possibly true internal explanations (Dixon & Schertzer 2005).

In addition to the general tendency within the team for external failure attribution, it was interesting to find that AM's attitude towards the issue, or perhaps more the conclusions he draws from the attribution, emphasized optimistic attribution somewhat more compared to A1 and A2:

"*The competitor is now doing aggressive pricing and many [of us] have noticed it, so what can we do about it… usually we cannot affect their pricing directly. But we can affect ourselves being more active on the market… more active with the customers so that not a single deal passes us by. And also becoming motivated ourselves, and get maybe kind of a fighting spirit that now we won't lose anymore, or that a challenge needs to be turned into a strength*". –AM

"*Customer contacts might, there might not be enough [of them], or then they aren't of adequate quality, and then again when those small battles are lost there… Say, the deal is done and then there are repeated failures in implementing the project, then sales of course has role in that, too. What you have sold, what has been calculated, what has been planned in the sales phase...*" –AM

This explanatory style is different from simply attributing failure to something external and that cannot be affected. For example, in the first excerpt AM also acknowledges that the root cause of the failure was external (aggressive competitor pricing) but implies that the outcome could still be influenced by internal actions (activity with customers, fighting spirit). The latter excerpt adds to the list of possible pain points where a salesperson could affect the failure or success of a project, which is a richer and more diverse set of reasons than those mentioned by A1 and A2. These internal actions undoubtedly highlight the significance of effort more than some of the comments by A1 and A2, which stated rather directly that effort does not always even matter. It would seem natural that a sales manager would want his team to believe equally firmly that

they can have an effect on the outcome despite the pricing, but it seems that there perhaps is not a completely shared understanding of failure attribution in this team. A2 had also personally noted his tendency to blame external factors for failure, which might suggest that he has registered attributing failure to external causes as a weakness and something that he should personally improved upon:

"I should still get more… be able to kind of think of those solutions more logically… sometimes I feel like I blame it easily on others although I could have maybe been able to affect it myself... so that I would be able to look at the cases more objectively". –A2

Likewise, A1 highlighted the importance of effort on many occasions. All in all it should not be concluded that the individual's from Company A do not think effort is important – it's significance only seemed to be questioned in situations where pricing was discussed. In general, personal effort was thought of as important and A1 even describes how he will not be upset as much by failure if he knows he has tried hard. Then again, it could be challenged that has he in fact tried as hard as possible, or does he only think that he has done so? If the salesperson is convinced that a deal cannot be won due to price competition, it might not encourage him to go the extra mile. This might lead to the individual accepting that he tried and due to aggressive competitor pricing the deal will still be lost so there is no point putting more effort into it. In that case, the individual's conception of what is "maximum effort" could be different from someone who genuinely believes in their possibility of influencing the result.

"In my opinion… when you know that you have given your all, it [losing the deal] doesn't really bother [me]." –A1

4.1.2 Learning from failure

Slightly surprisingly, the interviewees from Company A emphasized the importance of learning from failure. The reason for this being a surprising finding is that Company A appeared to heavily attribute failure to competitor pricing, an external factor they cannot affect themselves. Thus it could have been predicted that there is little to learn from cases you cannot affect, but this was not the case. Then again, showing readiness to accept internal attribution for failure by being interested about learning suggests that price is in fact an important explanation in their business, and it could be at least partly pure objectivity to accept it as the reason for losing a deal.

"If there is something you could have done better then you just admit that something should have been done like this… the result might be different and next time I will surely know and remember [to do so]… The learning, it comes instantly." –A1

"It [failure] doesn't annoy nearly as much if you find something to learn from it." –A2

All individuals seemed to be somewhat open to there being internal and external reasons for failure, while AM's style of making sense of the reasons in the previous excerpts could almost be compared to cognitive defusion. In cognitive defusion thoughts are framed in the form of "I have an idea that" instead of stating the idea as a fact, in order to gain better objectivity. AM uses a lot of "might" rhetoric when analyzing the reasons for failure (e.g. "customer contacts might, there might not be enough [of them]"), which frames the possibilities in the form of "I have an idea that there is a possibility that it was this reason". According to Hooper & McHugh (2013) this allows processing negative thoughts in a more neutral manner.

"In some cases there's a possibility that the product wasn't fitting... Perhaps we might have been fairly active and maybe even in the right place, but for some reason our message just didn't go through or strike a chord". –AM

Both salespeople seem quite open to admitting personal failure and learning from it. Especially A2 implied that it even helps him to psychologically overcome adversity if he feels that he has learned from it. It could be concluded that in this team, learning is valued and it could be seen as something that pushes individuals towards optimistic explanatory style, although strong external and stable attribution might be questionable. Salespeople analyzing and learning from their failures was also supported by the manager's opinion on how salespeople should process adverse situations. In addition to the individuals valuing learning from failure, it was also evident at an organizational level. AM's team had a process of going through almost all failures within their team and A2 mentioned having run cross-functional workshops recently where different functions such as production and sales analyzed failures in a coordinated matter. The success or failure of deals often involved how well the collaboration worked between sales and the team who would actually produce and install the solution, so learning at an organizational level was seen important.

"They should themselves see the solutions and failures... like what went wrong and how this could be improved in the future". –AM

"We do talk [about our lost deals], a lot actually, basically all of them are gone through... with the team. So we pretty well know each other's, each other's situations so that if something is lost it is definitely shared". –A1

4.1.3 Leadership

AM's previous comment of individuals learning independently from their own errors is not only a sign of appreciation towards learning, but also conveys one of the principals of error management. It involves minimal guidance but requires

encouragement to make and learn from mistakes as well as positive framing of errors (Keith & Frese 2008). AM also mentions that he takes into consideration when interacting with his team – even on the level of individual wordings – how to make negative issues more positive, which could be seen as subtle encouragement or at least approval towards failing. In addition, this attitude is supported by comments from A1 who mentions to not taking failures too hard. A2 also mentions it being easy for him to bring up failures with his manager which could imply him having a feeling that the manager accepts him making mistakes.

"*Sales is a pretty much a game of emotions… in some sense you need to be very accurate in your wordings and how you bring the message about [to the salesperson]. If you start creating too much pain about problems and challenges that does not work.*" -AM

"*Some take it [failing] harder and some a bit lighter, I take it perhaps from the lighter end.*" –A1

In addition to giving room for making errors and independently learning from them, AM's role in being a facilitator of learning was crucial in this team. AM especially underlines that although his salespeople are talented and experienced, they work very intensively with their cases which sometimes might blind them from seeing the big picture. In such cases it might be frustrating for the salesperson looking at the issue too closely not to be able to see the answer or learning independently. This again could be seen as a mechanism enabling helplessness, as it is not clear what needs to change in order for the salesperson to be successful again. In these situations when the salesperson has trouble finding an attribution to failure, it could be seen that the cause (which is not known and therefore cannot be affected) is stable rather than temporary. Stable attributions are again something that leads to helplessness rather than optimistic behaviors (Schulman 1999). AM interestingly describes his role in these situations as trying to help the salesperson to see the case differently and then figure out the solution on his own. This supports the thinking

associated with error management theory in that the salesperson is still fairly independent in making their own decisions. Perhaps even more importantly, not forcing the salesperson to the right direction but providing the tools to process errors independently can be seen as a very concrete message to the salesperson of AM approving him making errors. The salespeople also reported extremely positively about these efforts and seemed to value what they all referred to as 'coaching'.

"*It [the ability to cope with adversity] is indeed important and personally I strive to be open and provide support. I talk about something called looking at things with four eyes… we have experienced salespeople who have done [this] for a long time, who are clever and talented, that's not the issue. But when you focus on something intensively enough day after day then maybe your vision… narrows. Perhaps in some way the errors are a result of not being able to look outside the box or widen your vision, so that is where I try to give a second opinion and maybe lift them above the issue.*" –AM

"*Leading… yes, well it [coaching] is leading… I get some thoughts from him and then those thoughts are processed further… what I get from him is kind of like, could this work and then I have to basically buy those ideas and be able to process them, to personalize.*" –A2

"*I try to trigger thoughts, not give answers… as in "you should do this", it [AM's style of coaching] is mainly an attempt to slightly challenge, ask and evoke thoughts with that individual so that he could maybe figure out the answer himself… I don't even try to lead [to the right direction], the point is to ask questions so that he would better understand the dilemma and then figure out the answer.*" -AM

4.1.4 Team atmosphere

The general atmosphere in the sales team seemed to have an influence on optimistic behaviors. Based on some of the comments from interviewees, good team spirit that promotes open sharing could almost be seen as an indirect

antecedent or prerequisite to optimistic explanatory style. This was apparent in two main ways. Firstly, there was a general tendency to share failures with others and learn. This could be seen as enabling a positive framing of errors and learning from them. Secondly, collective anticipation of failure appeared to work as a mechanism that made facing adversity less painful and lowered the threshold of talking about it to others. The interviewees described having good personal relationships and getting along well, which gave them a feeling that they can share almost anything with their colleagues and manager. There were a few interesting illustrations of how this supported optimistic explanatory style. Perhaps most importantly, it seemed to inhibit helpless behavior such as trying to hide or disguise errors from others:

"We have a great team spirit in our team… it certainly helps in that it's easy to tell [issues], or we're kind of all in this together and we all equally experience wins and losses… we all experience wins and losses approximately in proportion and   when we have good team spirit it's easy to share all the victories and failures." –A1

"Well I believe that it [team spirit] is pretty much made from natural chemistry between individuals, with some people cooperation just doesn't work and with others it does. And maybe in this team they have succeeded in building that kind of people into the right places that kind of work together… and we have that collaboration." –A2

In addition, openly sharing errors and failures with colleagues (both formally and informally) gave the salespeople a chance to gain more insight to analyzing their errors (thus probably gaining more learning from them). While AM emphasized the value of looking outside the box and finding new answers to problems, it was also notable that sometimes the answer was reported that the salesperson already knew the answer, but experiences shared by peers helped gain confirmation that this is in fact an appropriate conclusion. This is important in the sense that higher confidence towards something being the correct attribution for failure could be seen as something that strengthens the

individual's conception of the reason being temporary instead of stable, since there is a higher chance of it being correctly identified and thus corrective actions might have higher expectations. Besides the informational value of sharing failures, the interviewees described that simply the chance to talk about their failures helped to overcome negative emotions.

"We had a sales meeting where I told about one [deal] that I lost, my most upsetting deal in the whole quarter… I found it an odd way to lose a deal because I wasn't even given the chance to get into negotiations… but was directly thrown out due to price… and then I was told that this has happened before, one colleague from the countryside told me hey, that has also happened to me many times… And because that had never happened to me before I got this good feeling that this has happened to others in the past, which kind of gave me support." –A1

The other important aspect related to open sharing of failures that emerged in the data was the influence of collective anticipation of failures which seemed to damper the negative feelings associated with losing out on a deal. The salespeople described how failing and especially telling about the failure does not feel so bad when they have involved their manager or colleagues in the sales process somehow in the earlier stages, so that everyone has almost the same information about the project in beforehand. In these cases they had already discussed together that there is a chance of not winning, and this already collectively anticipated loss would not then be as annoying. The opposite situation to this would be one where the salesperson would have to share a completely unexpected failure with others, of which the others would have very little information of. Perhaps this feels more like coming up with excuses than a case where everyone has knowledge of the details in beforehand, and the whole collective has been involved in the sense making process from the beginning. In addition, involving a manager or colleagues in an earlier phase of the lost deal might make the failure feel more of a team than

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individual defeat, as others have also given their input to the case and have therefore been affecting the outcome.

"Well usually we have pretty much discussed with my manager about these [cases] in beforehand so he knows everything quite well, so we have already in the bidding phase discussed pricing policy or other related issues… he knows what we have offered and even the price… and in the negotiation phase I also at that point tell him that now we are in negotiations and now this looks good or bad… and when the situation [losing the deal] comes it's actually the same, he has all the same information that I have". –A1

"There's so many cases in which we can almost in beforehand estimate that we probably won't get this… if the message comes that it [the deal] went to the competitor then it doesn't really rock my boat… your just like, well we kind of knew that was coming". –A1

4.2 Case Company B

Company B is a large international business-to-business company manufacturing industrial products. It operates globally on three different market segments, and has a head count of some thousands and an annual revenue in the billions of euros zone. The nature of business differs from Company A in the sense that deals are usually somewhat larger, more complex (usually involving tailored technological solutions) and scarcer in that a single salesperson would expect to have slightly fewer ongoing deals at a time. Price-sensitivity was not emphasized as a special characteristic to the market as it was in Company A.

Of Company B's interviewee's BM refers to one of it's sub-segment level sales directors. He has years of experience with the company and a very small team with only a few people reporting directly to him. However, in Company B different sub-segments often share the same customers and therefore collaborate very closely together. B1 and B2 belong to the sales teams of another sub-segment, but all three are under the same main market segment and practically can be considered members of an "extended" sales team. In

other words, they sell slightly different products to often the same customers, and collaborate closely with one another. Both B1 and B2 are senior sales people with years of experience, B2 being the only woman interviewed in this study. B2's role also involved sales development tasks parallel to her direct sales work.

4.2.1 Explanatory style

Similarly to the first case, one of the most interesting findings from Company B related to their explanatory style, especially concerning the internal/external attribution dimension. Whereas Company A's interviewees' (even AM's) failure attributions were strongly polarized to an external and stable reason (fierce pricing of competitors), all interviewees from Company B emphasized the importance of personal effort with little mentioning of external attributions as a possibility. There were perhaps two main dimensions to this attitude: (1) intrinsic motivation of doing your absolute best and considering it a virtue and (2) a strong belief that things can be affected by an individual's own actions, which basically attributes failure to internal and temporary reasons by default. The first part implies that the journey is in some sense more important than the outcome. People who are intrinsically motivated do things because they find them inherently interesting, while extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci 2000). Oftentimes you could assume sales being heavily extrinsically motivated – customers are treated a certain way to win the deal, deals are done to reach targets and bonuses. Company B interviewees however seem to be primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, since they – although certainly also being outcome-conscious – seem to genuinely enjoy the content of what they are doing. This could be considered relevant from the perspective of failure that being less outcome oriented, they might not consider failing as black and white as someone who measures success on a win or lose scale. For example, B1 describes not being able to input as much effort to his work as he would want to as the worst feeling in is job, whereas most interviewees in this study mentioned only lost deals when discussing this topic. If the definition of failure to a

salesperson is something else than only a lost deal, perhaps that would make overcoming lost deals easier compared to someone who uses the end result to measure their own value and success.

"Well it [the best feeling in my work] has to be if we can solve a customer's problem and we get to see it, it's great when we get to see it in practice so that you can go to the customer's site. We might have for example… a process to which we have implemented a technology and with which the customer can do it [the process] better, more fluently, more efficiently… then you have the happy customer who feels Company B has come and solved my problem and now my process works better and more efficiently, so that's the absolute best feedback you can get… although I'm customer-oriented I don't go about thinking about dollars, success is maybe difficult to measure in monetary value… but more like how happy the customer is with the solution or service or product that we were able to provide". –B2

"Sure, of course they [salespeople] need to monitor sales and figures and all. But surely, if you are in direct contact with customers, perhaps the most important source of satisfaction comes from the customer being satisfied. Good customer visits, good discussions with the customers… that always makes you happy." –BM

"The most negative experiences [in my work] come from… if you have many [cases] that require attention on the same day then… it's probably the worst feeling when you have to, or you can't do something as well as you would want to." –B1

In addition to intrinsically wanting to put an effort to their job, the interviewees seemed to genuinely believe their effort greatly affected the outcome. B2 listed for instance being in a rush and false assumptions as typical reasons for failure, and did not even mention any external possibilities. Being as puristic as the interviewees in Company B seemed to be about the external/internal dimension of optimism could even be slightly questioned. Recalling the debate between

Schulman (1999) and Sujan (1999) about this matter, Schulman originally proposed external attribution to be a part of optimism which was later countered by Sujan (1999) and Dixon & Schertzer (2005). However, even they admitted that there lies a risk in being too harsh on attributing failure to internal reasons, as it may result in needless self-punishment when there might not be any need for it. Schulman (1999) originally proposed that it is easier to overcome – or bypass – adversity when it is not seen as your own fault. Perhaps the following excerpts describe the downsides of a strict internal attribution (when the judgement is not objective but internal by default), since one of the interviewees admitted to dwelling on failures too long while pondering for the cause and another felt that failing had a negative effect on his overall motivation:

"On a personal level I perhaps tend to stay and dwell on the issue for too long… the upside is that I practically straight away try to analyze whether I could have done something differently but the downside is that I think about it too long".
–B1

"Maybe sometimes I might have felt a kind of loss of motivation if things or projects haven't advanced or we have experienced losses in business… so in those cases there's maybe been some lack of motivation." -BM

Apart from this, the case study interviewees did not show signs of helpless behavior to suggest that internal attribution to failure would have been a problem in general. Instead, their attitude seemed to emphasize objectivity and healthy self-criticism from a learning perspective, cementing belief in the saying if there is a will there is a way – which at least in their context seemed to be the case most of the time. Not considering external attribution as a reason for failure is quite evident in the excerpts below, particularly price is even slightly belittled as an attribution to failure:

"The usual reason that immediately always comes [laughs] is that the competitor has practiced stupid pricing or gone way, way under and we weren't

able to react, but that's actually an extremely bad excuse… Of course you need to then find the reason from yourself, what could have been done differently and so on." –BM

"It [reason for failure] usually falls under… something has not been seen, that's the reason. Something has been missed or then you haven't acknowledged the importance of something at the time, it could be written between the lines in some email but at that point your brain hasn't acknowledged that this is the important thing here… so when you think of what are the critical factors you find out that one of has been missed." –B2

4.2.2 Learning from failure

Another reason why the interviewees seemed to possess such a strong sense of their personal possibilities to influence adverse situations could be their attitude towards learning. Especially B1 had a strong tendency for self-criticism and looking for things to develop in his own performance – perhaps to the point where someone might question is he attributing failure to internal reasons "by default". Interestingly, B1 also had a vision that a failure is not in fact a failure if you can learn from it. This perhaps also explains his thorough self-assessments, as it seems his primary motivation is not to ultimately find out what caused or whose fault the failure was, but to use it as an exercise to constantly develop his own skills and question his own beliefs. Surely he was also looking to find out what actually caused the failure (or had the greatest impact), but as the following excerpts might imply, perhaps his mindset was inclined more to the direction of finding out, regardless of the outcome of the situation, if there was something he could develop for the next time.

"…even when we fail in something you need to find out what was done right and at least try to learn from those so that the atmosphere is positive… when we take on the next project…" –B1

"If our sales hasn't known anything about this [the competitor having a superior solution] then of course that's some form of failing… But in a way, I don't really

experience it [losing a deal] as a failure [laughs]… A colleague in Company B can learn from it or perhaps someone can be warned that we lost this kind of deal because the competitor did this." –B1

Likewise, B2 also talks about learning and reports holding personal development sessions with herself where she writes down learnings and what she could improve upon. These perhaps further support the previous notion of Company B interviewees being more focused in developing themselves than solving what went wrong in a case. Or rather, using the failed case as a tool to develop themselves. With this kind of mentality, finding out the causes for failure might already in itself be important, but it is not done for the sake of knowing what went wrong, but for personal reflection. Both B1 and B2 mention that the same errors should not be repeated, and BM also brings up that after the learning things should then be done differently next time. This makes it sound like they really take their learning seriously and genuinely expect it to be useful to them in the future – and to be applied in a concrete manner in practice.

"… what I always try to do is I list those things… I think an honest feedback discussion with yourself about what I could have done better [is good] and yes, I actually write them down for myself sometimes so that they would stick to my mind better so I wouldn't repeat them another time." –B2

"In fact, you should try and learn something about it [the failure] so you can do things differently next time, or at least understand why you didn't get the deal." –BM

4.2.3 Leadership

Company B was an extremely interesting and rich case that provided a host of insight regarding managerial actions that could be linked to enhancing optimistic explanatory style within the team. With what appears to be high intrinsic motivation and internal attribution to failure, this team is a particularly interesting

case from a managerial perspective in providing insight to the managerial side of my research question: how can managers enhance and encourage optimistic explanatory style collectively in their team? An important notion that came up in the interviews was a certain piece of mind resulting from being certain that your manager will support you even in case of failure. Moreover, failing was thought to be a collective experience that happens together with the manager, instead of an individual loss that is then shared with the manager. BM as a manager takes ownership of his subordinates' failures while both B1 and B2 describe how it feels from a salesperson's perspective to know you have support from your manager:

"Maybe the most important thing is that the subordinate has a feeling that the manager is backing me up and when we make decisions together I can trust that although… if later we would come to a conclusion that it wasn't the right decision, the manager will still support me." –B1

"…the manager's role is to stand by the person who kind of screwed up or failed. And it's extremely important for a manager to always talk about we and not you. So that we, I am one of we, if you succeed then we succeed and if you fail then we fail." –B2

"…no, no, salespeople don't just go about on their own and then report to me afterwards… I'm involved in approving our approach and how to advance [with the case] and so on. So in that sense it [losing a deal] is kind of a collective failure." –BM

Showing example was brought up as another powerful way in which the manager can influence the team's attitude towards errors and failures. It seems especially useful in communicating the message of error management theory, in that errors are acceptable and part of learning. As discussed with Company A, it is important for a manager to somehow frame errors positively so that they are viewed as learning opportunities (enhancing personal development) and also absorbing the shock effect of failure which allows the salesperson to recover

faster from the negative feelings involved (Boichuk et al 2014). B2 describes a practical example of this, and also notes that leadership is not only something outsourced to managers, but everyone in the team can and should take collective initiative to realign the team's attitude towards failure:

"The power of example is unbelievable… when you put yourself on the line and and share those personal failures openly, tell everyone hey can you believe how I screwed up! Like now you are going to hear the mother of all mistakes. So that also opens everyone else to tell about them [failures]. And that kind of leading by example is in my opinion very… [important]" –B2

"…and the example doesn't always have to come from the manager, all team members are able to affect management or changing the culture with their own example." –B2

As in Company A, it seemed that the manager's leadership style regarding error management needed to take into account independent learning from errors but also apply a coaching or sparring approach when the salesperson needed personal support at times. The coaching style described here can be understood to be quite similar to AM's, with the focus being more on the salesperson coming up with solutions and answers than receiving them directly. Below, B1 describes how the value of listening to ideas from his manager is usually just getting confirmation for his own ideas and thus possibly restoring lowered self-confidence. B2 also describes the value of having the chance to reflect and be challenged in what could have been done differently:

"…going through the case with your manager, that eases it [the negative feeling of losing]… he listens to the story and what has happened and then he picks a few [issues] from there, kind of like bullet points, that we are now going to do this and this. And although these are things you already know… should be done differently next time, it surely is calming when it comes from your manager's mouth… what I mean with this is that you have already come up with the

conclusions in the process as your manager… so you can experience a small feeling of success after the failure about having drawn the right conclusions… that kind of increases your self-confidence." –B1

"I think it is extremely important that you must be able to reflect your own thoughts and actions and it is not always easy to see… which are the critical decision making factors for him [the customer], these I think it is worthwhile to reflect [with the manager]". –B2

4.2.4 Team atmosphere

Positive team atmosphere and spirit came through in many different ways and could perhaps be interpreted as a prerequisite for much of the acceptance and open sharing of failures described earlier. Good relations within the team does not alone necessarily mean that errors are accepted and shared, but it would be hard to imagine this being possible without them. For example, B2 talks about empowerment and giving freedom and responsibility to people, which could be seen as a supporting factor of error management which is a rather independent way of processing failures (Keith & Frese 2008). Interestingly, notice that BM mentions the importance of thanking when someone has been "doing the right things", as opposed to only giving credit based on outcome. Giving credit based on the act of doing something in a desirable manner instead of the separable outcome could be seen as directing towards or triggering intrinsic motivation in the respondent of the message (Ryan & Deci 2000). This is an especially interesting detail considering that the interviewees seemed to be particularly intrinsically motivated. Giving credit and support were generally emphasized in the interviews and B2 also tied these factors into employee motivation and performance. According to her, the way these show in practice is simply by being interested in other team members and showing appreciation towards them that way.

"…one thing is of course when you thank or give positive feedback when something has gone well or someone has been doing the right things." –BM

"…I've once said that getting people excited, encouraging and supporting them are the three things for a team to inspire you so that motivation and desire is created…" –B2

"…it [excitement, encouragement and support] shows as being interested. That's what it's all about, people are interested about the things you are doing, they are interested about the things that are brought from the customers… it [also] shows in giving freedom, giving responsibility and empowerment to do things and take them forward independently". –B2

Another function of a healthy collective that came up was its unique way of providing emotional support. B2 made the point that work related issues are often confidential so that it is not possible to vent about them outside the office, at least at the level of detail required. This type of communication might be a sign of good team spirit and trust, as it is hard to imagine wanting to open up on delicate and personal issues unless you have good relations with the other person involved. B2 described that her own process of overcoming adversity includes venting off the negative emotions, after which she would be open to behaviors typical for optimistic explanatory style. Therefore colleagues bring unique value in processing failures by playing the role that perhaps a husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, friend or a family member might have in another context of failure. This perhaps adds dimension to the "support" term often mentioned by the interviewees, as it entails of both informational value (e.g. co-analysis of a situation) and emotional value (e.g. having the chance to open up on a negative emotion).

"We do venting out as we call it, it's done every once in a while and when you have had the chance to vent out, you then say thanks for listening [laughs]... and of course when a lot of these issues are confidential you cannot vent out with just anyone, I'm now referring to this venting out as in letting out steam… then you can only mention that you had a bad day at work. You cannot share the details. But with a colleague you can because he knows there's not that

secrecy and confidentiality aspect, so the best person who to vent out about these issues is usually your colleague." –B2

The appreciation towards colleagues mentioned earlier was not limited only to situations where individuals were given credit for good work – it actually was evidenced in exactly the opposite context when there was need for negative or critical feedback. B2 emphasizes that critical feedback is a not a punishment but a sign of appreciation and trust, in that the individual is believed to be able to improve on something. Not believing that the person would be able to improve might mean giving them alternative or easier tasks, or perhaps even asking them to leave the company, so critical feedback should be taken as a sign of trust. In the story below shared by BM he tells how the explanatory style of one employee needed to be shifted from helpless to optimistic regarding the internal/external dimension. This is perhaps the most direct attempt described in trying to affect explanatory style, if you compare it with actions such as showing example or fortifying intrinsic motivation through feedback style.

"…even more important than giving positive encouraging feedback is to direct, or push the person back on track when things haven't gone well… I've made it clear to everyone that it is a huge sign of trust… and that shows a huge sign of trust when you know that this person can do even better, if that is neglected then it's basically just swept under the rug… let's not give him these kinds of tasks in the future…" –B2

"We had this case that the salesperson didn't take enough responsibility from his own actions and always thought that the problems were elsewhere. That it wasn't his fault but the rest of the organization didn't support him enough… yes he did [believe he lost deals because of this] because he didn't get support, but I had to emphasize that it is not about that but it is his personal responsibility to make his case, or ensure that he gets the support… salespeople need to sell their own projects internally so that support, it doesn't come automatically from inside the organization but you need to go get it, and reason and sell internally to get the support…" –BM

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4.3 Case Company C

Company C is a large internationally operating business-to-business company providing complex and high-tech infrastructure solutions. It has undergone large reformations over the past years and is currently one of the few industry leaders in its business. It is the largest company involved in this study measured on both head count (tens of thousands) as well as revenues (billions of euros). Importantly, its business environment differs especially from Company A in that there are very few potential cases and deals available at a time, but the deal sizes can be notably large and customers are always large companies:

"The thing with these figures is that some of these deals might be worth… hundreds of millions [of euros]." –CM1

Company C has a matrix organization where people from different functions are involved in the sales process. Since deals are rather unique projects that require tailoring or building a solution to the customer's needs, the sales team involves people from a purely sales focused function and another function, that consists of people with both sales and technical expertise. CM1 is the head of sales for a geographical area in Company C, while CM2 heads a function combining sales and technical expertise. In this case it was perhaps not meaningful to try to interview people with the same logic as with the two others, as Company C's sales organization is not a simple "a sales manager and his sales team" design, but a rather case specific team of individuals with different sets of expertise working together. Both CM1 and CM2 are extremely experienced sales professionals – CM1 having about 20 years of history with Company C and CM2 is also part of senior sales management in the company.

4.3.1 Explanatory style

While Company B interviewees were characterized with focus on effort and doing your best – which also seemed to be a source of satisfaction implying deep intrinsic motivation – Company C provided an interesting benchmark with a very different approach. Perhaps this area would have been the most interesting one to explore with further interviews, since CM1 and CM2 had very different views on the topic and data saturation had probably not yet been reached regarding this area. In that sense, it remained a bit unclear how the sales organization as a collective regarded effort. Nevertheless, CM2 took a perspective where winning was emphasized above all – not the best effort. This could be seen as an example of high extrinsic motivation, because the primary driver for working is a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci 2000). CM2 appears to believe that the maximum effort potential for someone who is focusing on winning is higher ("the extra mile") than for someone how is focusing on doing their best. He also explains how this attitude shows in practice to help the team win deals:

"…you cannot be a best effort team where we kind of try to do our best… no, because best effort means that we will do our best and then see what happens, they use this kind of terminology a lot in [Finnish] sports. Instead the team needs to genuinely be such that it really, really wants to win and that radiates across the negotiation table to the customer that we want it more, and also internally it mobilizes people… it radiates to the rest of the team so they also go the extra mile in everything." –CM2

"Technically the bids could be, and actually are [very similar] because of standardization… products, terms and prices might be very close to each other with all three short listed companies, and in a tie situation the customer certainly goes quite often to the one, and chooses the one which radiates an ability to do things because every time a project begins there will always be surprises and adversities, so a team that feels good usually then also functions well and also wins it [the deal]." –CM2

An outlook closer to Company B interviewees is taken by CM1, who does not emphasize the outcome but the way it was achieved. This could again be interpreted as pointing towards high intrinsic motivation and as CM1 possesses a managerial role, he might also be attempting to spread this kind of thinking within his team:

"Of course you need to be kind of sensitive, if you for example lose a deal it is possible that you have done almost everything right because all deals cannot be won. That's just the way it is." –CM1

"Well, if we lose a deal we've always tried to give a lot of credit [for trying] because you can lose a deal in so many ways." –CM1

Two interesting questions arise from this. Firstly, is emphasizing outcome or the journey more effective in underlining the importance of effort? Secondly, in a case of failure, how do these different framings affect responses? Is there for example a larger chance of an extrinsically motivated salesperson to start showing signs of helplessness in face of failure than there might be for an intrinsically motivated one? Despite a strong emphasis on winning, CM2 also does brings up the realities of the matter since he displays objectivity in reflecting the chances of winning and reminds what the odds of winning actually are. In fact, it seems that he is using the emphasis of winning as a strategy to fire people up and get them out of their comfort zones, instead of blindly believing in winning each case:

"…our industry has roughly usually five players but if we say three are usually the big ones and we are one of them… mathematically when each of these… have been invited to the final [negotiation round], and it's very common that these three are almost always there, then when we are in the final only one can win. So if it would go equally in proportion we would win one and lose two." –CM2

Company C interviewees seemed to have a fairly rich and diverse set of attributions for failure. The previously discussed perspective of having a strong emphasis on winning could also imply that CM2 has a very strong belief in being able to influence the outcome with his own actions. That again would point to strong internal attribution compared to external, since the outcome is believed to be greatly affected by going the extra mile. Moreover, both seemed to be rather analytical about the cases, not sticking to a certain explanation by default without in-depth investigations. Perhaps the different attitudes towards effort and winning are also reflected in the internal/external dimension of attribution, as CM1 seems to emphasize external and CM2 internal reasons:

"Yes, well one thing is the price… and the others reasons [for failure]… sometimes it is hard to define what you need to do [in the project] but you still need to commit to a price, and then estimating the work load and everything isn't always easy." –CM1

"… [competitor name mentioned] is not a listed company like we are… so they can kind of do pricing on a different logic compared to us." –CM1

"The typical easy reasons are that the competitor was cheaper… then another typical reason is that the competitors' product was better on these and these dimensions. And that might well be the case, many times both of these can be true. But it is possible to win a deal with a more expensive product or worse product, that's not the whole story. Or then we might have done a pricing error that we have calculated the the costs to be higher than they actual are for example regarding service, these are typical explanations…" –CM2

The comments by CM2 could be regarded more optimistic than CM1. Price and competitor pricing advantage are fairly stable, external reasons that cannot be affected. CM1 also mentions an internal reason, the difficulty to commit to a price, which could then again be interpreted general (making large estimates is difficult in general) and there is no reason to suggest it being only temporary, making it a stable challenge. Likewise, CM2 mentions two external and stable

attributions, but adds that they are "easy reasons" implying that failure cannot be attributed to them, at least fully. He brings up errors in pricing calculations, which in turn is an internal (the team's own fault), specific (poor personal performance limited to the topic of a miscalculated cost estimate), and temporary (a mistake instead of not knowing how to do it) attribution.

4.3.2 Learning from failure

A more common message that came through from Company C was that failures should always be analyzed carefully for learning purposes. Like with the other cases, the interviewees mentioned self-reflection and discussing cases with peers or managers as important. Something interesting that was mentioned as typical for their industry was the chance to consult customers about the reasons for being rejected. In Company C's case consulting customers was a standard procedure in the industry – perhaps understandably as single deals were quite significant and complex – but the same idea could still perhaps be applicable to other contexts. Some company A and B interviewees described how challenging it sometimes is to figure out what went wrong, and that the opinion of a colleague *might* help in getting assurance. But, only might – whereas if the salesperson has the opportunity to discuss the deal with the customer and is open to listening, they probably will get the chance to know for sure.

"It pays off to go through would happened on the customer's side, afterwards it is usually easier because customers are more open… often if you have lost the deal customers give you up to two, one or two feedback sessions where they tell where Company C didn't perform well or what went wrong and where we need to improve. Above all, you should be extremely receptive. You can disagree, but it doesn't matter because the customer has the money and he decides. If the customer says that he didn't like green cars, then he doesn't like green cars no matter how nice we think they are." –CM2

"…it [loss analysis] needs to be done together with the customer and most customers these days have these tendering teams, so usually we sit down with

them and they give us a presentation… firstly we cannot have any prejudices but we need to listen very carefully. Usually when you have been negotiating you tend to slightly disagree with the customer [laughs], but you need to neutralize that… and think did we understand what the customer wanted in reality…" –CM1

In both of these comments keeping an open mind is emphasized as a prerequisite for learning, as well as a certain kind of objectivity. It is also noteworthy that the context of learning is rather different in Company C's case compared to Companies A and B. While all of the cases provided examples of failure analysis and learning that took place in formal situations such as sales meetings, informal reflection with colleagues and one-to-one discussions with the salesperson's manager still perhaps had a more significant role. Learning in Company C seems to be based more on process than personal relationships or personal initiative, with formal and in-depth loss analyses conducted after losing deals. The downside of this style was described to be that although the analyses were done well and had good content, that content wasn't always shared too openly and there wasn't an effective process to share the findings.

"Every time if we conduct those loss analyses they tend to stay inside quite a small group… on the other hand we do share more openly when we have successes." –SM2

This restricted sharing of failures and learnings is perhaps surprising, since the interviewees seem to consider the content of these analyses very worthwhile. Moreover, they claim that business is rather similar across the world, meaning that the same best practices and learnings could probably be utilized successfully on a wider scale. Not surprisingly, the interviewees recognized the lack of formal sharing as something to develop in their teams.

"Well then you win with a higher probability [if listening to learnings from others] and avoid the pitfalls which others have been exposed to so it is worthwhile sharing, and also listening… This is such a similar business across the world that these are easily replicable, these best practices and pitfalls…" –CM2

"We do have these experience sharing sessions… the formal ones just don't work very well because people, they aren't done too well and people don't have time for them [laughs]… that certainly isn't our strength…" –CM1

4.3.3 Leadership

The leadership styles of CM1 and CM2 were characterized by leading by example and displaying personal involvement. Many instances were mentioned that could be considered transformational leadership, which involves articulating a vision, showing example in reaching to that vision and providing personal guidance (Podsakoff et al 1996). CM1's emphasis of winning as the ultimate goal could be viewed as the vision or objective of the sales team, whereas the means to get there would be going the extra mile in effort, of which he describes showing example in the excerpt below. Both CM1 and CM2 also discussed giving personal support to their subordinates in the interviews.

"When we really need to deliver, you have to show example. That means that when we are working on a tender one o'clock at night somewhere, you have to be there. And then you even write part of the tender text if you need to. So, by showing example, that's how you best get everyone on board." –CM1

The leading by example and providing support features of transformational leadership are especially emphasized by the interviewees. According to CM1, it is a common risk that only the first phase – articulating a vision – is done properly, after which the team is left on its own. CM2 points out how this is not only restricted to a manager-subordinate relationship, but extends across all organizational levels. He describes how attitudes can be changed when

showing example to people who are above, below or at the same organizational level.

"…we have sometimes had a tendency to help teams in defining [a plan] but they certainly will have to do everything themselves after that. And that's bad. The example of doing, being involved hands-on… I can tell them that this is what I mean by this and this is how I would do this. That is what I consider most important here." –CM1

"[I lead] simply by example… usually even in a flat organization so that you don't have that many organization levels…someone is always looked upon as a role model, just based on how they behave, upwards and downwards towards your own team and sideways, that is extremely important. With your own behavior you can create a certain atmosphere, you can do it at every company..." –CM2

Company C interviewees seemed to be very much into the principles of transformational leadership and were eager to emphasize the manager's role in that. However, recalling the point made by Boichuk et al (2014), the key to applying transformational leadership in sales teams is error management, which decreases the loss of effectiveness of this leadership style when facing repeated adversity. Error management did not emerge equally as a theme from these interviews; in that the interviewees did not report to framing errors positively or encouraging towards committing them for learning purposes. Strong focus on winning could even be seen as an opposite stance to error management, since errors might well cost the team the win and are therefore not in line with achieving the goal. However, perhaps the team atmosphere provides some more insight on how the error management thinking might derive through a different mechanism in Company C.

4.3.4 Team atmosphere

Failures in such a complex team, consisting of up to tens of people from different functions in a matrix organization, might set additional leadership challenges. For example, the content revealed in the loss analyses discussed previously would probably have little effect without a certain receptive atmosphere. Two main themes emerged in the interviews that affect atmosphere in sales teams: (1) experiencing failures and successes collectively and (2) inhibiting any blaming of others or finding scapegoats. Working in a very large team that is trying to win a deal is probably quite different to working alone on a small repair sale, as might be the case at times with Company A salespeople. Therefore the manager needs to perhaps put extra effort into communicating the message of winning and losing together. Both CM1 and CM2 emphasize taking ownership of their subordinates' actions as an important managerial behavior and highlight the importance of the feeling of succeeding or failing collectively:

"…these [deals] are so big and complex that no single person can ever be responsible… like responsible if something goes wrong and they also can't be the sole reason why something went well. This is team work." –CM1

"…you take it [failure] as a responsible individual or leader… it is very easy to go and say that you made a mistake here. But if I'm someone's manager, it means they are all my mistakes too…" –CM2

The other powerful message from the interviewees was the importance of prohibiting any blaming. This is what I would also interpret to be something that acts as an error management agent, since framing blaming others unacceptable could be understood as an indirect positive framing of errors. Or at least something that decreases the risk of additional negative emotions when making a mistake. This is possibly especially important in this team, since neither CM1 nor CM2 reported of doing any direct error management. It would be interesting to conduct further research within their teams and investigate whether people in

fact experience the fact that their managers promote not blaming individuals for failure as an approval to commit errors, and if they have a positive framing of errors. Below CM2 explains why blaming has such a toxic effect on the team's atmosphere and how it triggers helpless behavior, such as concentrating on securing your own back instead of being committed to team objectives:

"…when we face adversities, we need to have leaders who are senior enough or team managers or team leaders that do not go into the berating… critique and feedback can be given but the kind of berating and public scapegoating, looking for who is guilty, that immediately kills off everything…" –CM2

"…you should always perform an [loss] analysis, look into the mirror, but if you start pinpointing at individuals like you should have done this and that… then when that same team goes to their next project it could lead to a situation where people don't have the courage to be brave in their suggestions and in customer situations they're just protecting their own back all the time, so that next time if, or when we fail, then at least I won't be blamed…" –CM2

Finally, one interesting point was made by CM2 regarding giving credit to as many people as possible. It might sound trivial to remember to thank involved people when the team is successful. Considered in relation to his strong emphasis on winning, perhaps the need of highlighting the win might have an even more important role in this case. If success is measured only with a "win or lose the deal" rating, the negative (and positive) emotions might be more extreme compared to measuring success on for instance effort, where the strong negative emotions from losing could be accompanied with mildly positive emotions from learning or trying hard. Thus the extrinsic motivational style of CM2 probably requires fortification of those positive feelings so that when facing an inevitable loss the team still stays motivated, having had the taste of victory which felt extremely good. Then again, after repeated failures this affect could possibly begin to erode (Boichuk et al 2014).

When the customer project, sales project has been won it is important to celebrate it, be it champagne or cake or something else… but you don't only lift the person accountable, the manager of the customer team, or those who are naturally on stage due to their position… when giving credit number one has to be the whole team, preferably a bit more than a bit less. Everyone wants to be a hero and at that moment you should lift lots of heroes on to that stage." CM2

5 Discussion

The case findings were already analyzed and also commented on in the previous section, however the following chapter will focus on discussing the findings in more depth. In this section I will first discuss the cases in relation to each other. Here I attempt to elaborate on common messages as well as differences, and describe how certain phenomena may have different forms depending on the case context. Secondly, I will reflect these findings in relation to extant research, and discuss how they support my theoretical argumentations in this study. Next I discuss managerial implications of my findings and finally point out limitations of my study.

5.1 General discussion

Personally, I found that comparing explanatory styles of the interviewees of the different companies produced possibly the most interesting insights. With the exception of Company C where only two interviews were conducted, the explanatory styles within the sales teams seemed to be aligned with each other. Hence it might even be justified to talk about a collective explanatory style – a culture of how failures are explained in the team. Although there was a slight difference in the implication of external attributions between AM and the two other salespeople, in general price as an external attribution seemed to be characteristic to their explanatory style. There were even signs of helpless behavior resulting from heavy pricing-related attribution of failure. Company B provided an interesting reference in that price as well as external explanations

in general were not only neglected, but belittled as sorry excuses. When analyzing the explanations mentioned by interviewees in Company B, they seemed to be systematically unstable, internal and specific. Company C perhaps was somewhere in the middle here, stressing the objectivity and thoroughness of finding *the* explanation (note: not *an* explanation). Their way of discussing possibilities was perhaps closest to cognitive defusion methods in that the existence of different possibilities were accepted and they were analyzed neutrally without prejudices. In Company A's business, the situation could possibly really be such that the price is a more important criterion than in B or C, and that the salesperson has less possibilities to affect it than in the two other industries. Regardless of the reasons, it is interesting to notice the descriptive examples of how explanatory style in sales teams creates optimistic or helpless behaviors.

The definition of and attitude towards failing also seemed to be closely related with explanatory style. This was another area where interesting differences emerged, and that could possibly help to explain the differences in failure attribution. To some extent Company A, but especially Company B seemed to define success and failure based on more factors than purely winning the deal. Company A interviewees mentioned getting satisfaction from winning little "day-to-day battles" and learning. Company B interviewees appeared to show strong intrinsic motivation, being genuinely focused on doing their job well and helping customers. Quite the opposite definition was suggested in Company C, particularly by CM2, who emphasized that only winning the deal should be the team's objective, not best effort. This was justified by it making people go the extra mile and radiating a positive message to the customer, whereas best effort teams would be more likely to stay in their comfort zone and not be as likely to win.

The somewhat different business logics of the industries might affect these differences in failure definition, since Company C made fewer deals annually, but the scale of a single deal was enormous. Therefore the significance of each single deal was exponential compared to e.g. Company A, where revenues were built from lots of smaller deals. Perhaps this makes creating a sense of urgency around winning in Company C an appropriate framing, whilst the faster

cycle of business makes it more important for salespeople of Company A to get over inevitable losses quicker. This might also partly explain Company A's tendency for using price as a strong explanation for failure, since there isn't as much time to start to analyze each loss with several other deals ongoing simultaneously. In this context, practicing the kind of learned optimism originally suggested by Schulman (1999) could be justified, where attributions to failure are commonly external in order to avoid unnecessary self-punishment and the focus being of overcoming (even neglecting at the expense of learning) the failure quickly.

Perhaps the main message that recurred throughout the interviews was the significance of learning from failure. This is a rather crucial factor of optimism, as learning can be seen as a mechanism that turns stable attributions of failure into unstable ones, by providing an idea of what can be done next time to avoid the reason for failure. According to Sujan (1999), the stability over time dimension of an explanation might have a significantly greater impact on optimistic behavior compared to the internal/external and global/specific dimensions. All cases provided examples of different types of learning, each having distinct characteristics regarding how it took place. In Company A and Company B, personal learning through self-reflection and (often informal) communication with peers or managers seemed to have more emphasis. In Company A learning was even mentioned as having a dampening effect to the negative emotions related to failure, again emphasizing the importance of learning in overcoming adversity. Perhaps due to the nature of their business, learning at Company C was centered more around formal loss analyses, involving a team of people investigating why a project was lost. This could be described as more collective sense-making than what was typical to Company A and Company B. There the nature of learning seemed to more often be such that an individual reflected on a personal issue independently or informally with a colleague.

The combination of transformational leadership accompanied with error management – which Boichuk et al (2014) regard the most effective leadership style for sales teams – also came through in very distinctive ways in the cases. Particularly error management seemed to have slightly different forms and even

a different locus. Error management is a minimal guidance learning technique, where errors are considered natural by-products of learning (Keith & Frese 2008). This was exemplified in Company A by AM not tending to give answers to his employees' problems, but instead he would rather ask questions to make the salespeople think for themselves. Salespeople described that the support from discussions with the manager were mainly confirming what they had already found out themselves, instead of listening to what should be done. This is perhaps a good example of a conscious choice by the sales manager to make his subordinates learn rather independently, even though it might result in errors. The most evident form of error management in Company B seemed to be the message that your manager will always back you up no matter what. The interviewed salespeople seemed have a very secure feeling in that they have a license to make mistakes. An example of how this message could be conveyed was by showing example with a person's own behavior. Showing example in general could be considered an area directly relating to the part of my research question investigating managerial actions through which optimistic explanatory style could be created or supported. It was also mentioned by Company C as a tool of molding salesperson attitude. B2 reported how really opening up to others about how much you have "screwed up" helps to make others open up more easily and moreover makes errors less scary. Company C is an interesting case from the perspective of error management, since no such direct positive framing of errors seemed to be evident. Focus was purely on winning, which possibly leaves little room for trial-and-error. Despite this strongly extrinsically motivated approach, the mechanism that seemed to act as an agent for error management in Company C was the managers' strong opinions on prohibiting blaming and open individual level berating. This could be interpreted as a means of communicating the message of managers approving failures. It is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to assess the quality of these styles, but comparing them interestingly emphasizes how the same theoretical doctrines may come in different forms and weightings depending on the unique context of the sales team.

In all of the cases, a healthy and open team atmosphere emerged as a prerequisite for many of the previously discussed aspects. Giving credit,

thanking and appreciating others by being interested in what they were doing recurred as important signs of a successful sales team. As to concrete benefits of these actions, for example having good personal relationships with colleagues and team spirit was described to make open sharing of failures easier. Open sharing again could be considered an avenue for learning, resulting in analysis and reflection of the possible causes together. In addition to enhancing learning, the atmosphere in the team had another important function. Especially Company B and also A mentioned the importance of just being able to talk about failures – which B2 referred to as "venting" – when overcoming adversity. Here the informational value of getting a second opinion was not as important as the sheer possibility to get rid of negative emotions by discussing them. Colleagues definitely play an important part in this sense, since they probably have the best expertise and understanding of the context, perhaps giving them a better position to understand the person venting than what many others may have. In that sense, a good team spirit can be seen to affect optimistic explanatory style both by reinforcing the learning effect of error management through increased reflection with colleagues, while also absorbing some of the negative emotions related to failing by giving the salesperson emotional peer support.

5.2 Theoretical implications

In my study I argued that sales organization effectiveness antecedents related to the sales management control area in current models are too generalized and quantity focused. I wanted to exemplify how the unique contexts of different sales teams affect managerial challenges and how one generalized action – such as "spending time coaching sales people" – is not applicable or quantifiable in the same way to all situations. Using the manager's time spent in coaching activities as an example, which is a measurement of successful "directing" in sales organization effectiveness models, while directing in turn is an antecedent of sales organization effectiveness through salesforce behavior performance (Piercy et al 1997), you would think that a sales manager should spend a lot of time doing "coaching activities". However, if you consider these cases and error management theory, spending a lot of time coaching might

actually prohibit a salesperson's learning process, which according to error management theory is intended to take place through committing errors and learning from them (Keith & Frese 2008). This is one example of how more qualitative and descriptive focus should be given to current antecedents of sales organization effectiveness.

Another example of this might be how the same outcome was at times reached by different, practically opposite managerial approaches between the cases. The end-goal of each sales team is undoubtedly to win deals, although they might also have other objectives. Company B was a good example of not emphasizing the outcome (winning) and instead concentrating on the journey by supporting intrinsic motivation. This framing enabled them to very effectively convey the message of error management – it's more about personal development than winning. However, by doing this they believed people would work better which would thereby ultimately also increase the chances of winning. Comparing this to Company C, where a strong outcome focus and extrinsic motivation was used as a tool to make people work harder, the two objectives appear completely opposite. CM2 described how a successful sales team is not a best effort team but a winning one, and error management was implemented through the prohibition of blaming. At first, these approaches seem so different that it begs the question of which one is right. However, it seems that both styles are effective for their own unique context. Therefore it would be impossible to generalize either way as better, since they might be perfectly suited for the business logic and culture of the case companies, but not directly applicable elsewhere. On the other hand, this case study does not provide insight on whether these in fact were the best managerial approaches for these contexts.

In addition, this study attempted to illustrate optimistic explanatory style and managerial actions related to it in practice. It brought up different explanatory styles and attitudes towards adversity, of which probably the most significant ones are the considerations related to the dimensions of learned optimism. Extant research seems to agree upon the stable/unstable and global/specific dimensions, but there have been different interpretations of whether a failure should predominantly be attributed to internal or external reasons (e.g.

Schulman 1999, Sujan 1999, Dixon & Schertzer 2005). This study adopted a view close to Dixon & Schertzer (2005), where internal attribution was predicted to create optimistic behavior with the consideration that cognitive defusion or other techniques enhancing objective analysis of the locus of causality should be involved. The case studies exemplified differences especially concerning this internal/external element, with Company B seeing external attribution almost as a sorry excuse whereas Company A was strongly relying on external reasons (price). As previously discussed, the environment of Company A differed from the others by having a much higher quantity of deals with a lower deal value. In that case, perhaps a predominantly external and stable attribution style enabled optimistic behaviors to some extent. Again, it seems that context should be taken into account when assessing this third dimension of optimism.

5.3 Managerial implications

As for managers, the goal of this study was to bring optimistic explanatory style theory to life and exemplify what it might look like and how it might be affected in everyday situations. It provides examples of how the subject can be approached from different angles and perhaps raises questions and provides a benchmark for analyzing the manager's personal team from this point of view. As previously argued, there seem to be several ways of supporting optimistic explanatory style, but the challenge lies in finding the right approach for each unique context. In general, I suggest that managers should pay attention to how failures are explained based on the three dimensions of learned optimism. It is also worthwhile to assess personal and the collective's attitude towards failing and the definition of it – what does failing mean in our team. Managers should then consider whether this is an appropriate attitude for their context, and does thinking about failure the way they do direct them towards their objectives. In addition to investigating the current state of things, managers would benefit from considering how they communicate about failure and whether the atmosphere of their team supports their chosen strategy. If they want to encourage error management, what is the most effective way to communicate it? Is the team atmosphere such that it enables the sharing of failures with good confidence?

5.4 Limitations

As a case study the findings presented here are interpretations of a situation and not generalizable. Relying strictly on semi-structured interviews did not make the methodical triangulation and validation of the findings possible, and the study might have been more credible and reliable had multiple research methods been used. In addition, data acquired from interviews may be affected by the interviewees wanting to portray a certain picture of themselves or their organization, and it is not certain whether the ideas and behaviors described are always evident in reality. Although sample size is not a quantitative consideration in qualitative research which is based on the point of saturation, the sample size of three or two interviews per case can be considered rather small. While Companies A and B seemed to reach the point of saturation with three interviews by the emergence of recurring messages, Company C might have provided more insight with more interviews. CM1 and CM2 had slightly differing points of view about some of the themes, which makes it challenging to make conclusions about the culture of the organization.

6 Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the research question: "how is a culture of optimistic explanatory style evident, created and supported in high-performing sales teams in large international business-to-business companies?" This question was attempted to be answered by a multiple case study where three successful sales teams from large international business-to-business companies were analyzed and compared. Through the case studies, I attempted to exemplify what optimistic explanatory "looks like" in practice, as well as bring up factors affecting the adoption of such a mindset within a sales team. The need for such a study was justified by the overt generalization of what are regarded as beneficial managerial behaviors in sales organization effectiveness literature. The findings of my case studies illustrate how context-

dependent many of these managerial behaviors are, possibly making replicating or quantitatively measuring their quality very challenging, if not impossible.

Optimistic explanatory style and attitude towards failure differed greatly between the cases. These were hypothesized to possibly being partly context related (namely business environment and logic), but also dependent on personal differences and, most importantly, deliberate managerial decisions. Learning emerged as an important theme that was seen as the desired outcome of failure from an error management point of view, but also as something that dampened the effect of negative emotions from failure. The study also exposed different leadership styles and managerial approaches regarding how to create the desired kind of explanatory style, especially concerning error management and whether intrinsic or extrinsic motivation was used as a primary source of motivation. Finally, good team atmosphere was identified as an important prerequisite for optimistic explanatory style within the collective.

Based on this study, interesting avenues for future research might include conducting an even more in-depth single-case study, where the interpersonal relationships within the team would be examined more closely. This might also involve ethnographic and observation techniques in order to verify interview findings. A richer illustration of a case might bring new insights on how the explanatory style of a team is co-created by different factors, adding to the findings of this study. In addition, exploring *how* the richer description and qualitative perspective suggested in this study could be incorporated into sales organization effectiveness models should be considered. This study does not suggest how this point of view should be included into sales organization effectiveness research in practice, but only challenges the generalization apparent in current models. Another unexplored area is the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and explanatory style. Findings from Company B gave reason to speculate that intrinsic motivation might in some ways support optimistic explanatory style, but generalizations cannot be made on this basis. This might provide another interesting topic for future research.

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8 Appendix

Appendix 1: Outline for salesperson interviews (A1, A2, B1, B2)

Semi-structured interview structure for salespeople

1. Role in the organization
- Describe your team and role
- Typical daily tasks and challenges

2. Team atmosphere
- What is are important factors in the atmosphere of a successful sales team?
- How are these factors evident in your own team?
- How can these factors be enhanced by team members? And by your manager?
- What are important aspects of good leadership in sales teams?

3. Personal attitude towards failure and adversity
- What causes positive and negative feelings in your work?
- What do you typically do to process failures?
- What are typical reasons for failure?
- Do you often feel that you could have affected the outcome by doing something differently?
- Do you learn something from these situations?
- How do you think failures should be processed? What are your personal strengths and weaknesses?

4. Interaction within team
- Do you often share your failures with others?
- Is there competition within the team? Does it affect your willingness to share failures?
- Are there personal differences in how people experience failure?

5. Team practices
- What are typical situations for sharing failures? Are they more often formal or informal?
- What happens in practice during these situations?
- Are there benefits in discussing failures? What are they? E.g. looking for answers or venting?
- What practices support this kind of interaction?

Appendix 2: Outline for sales manager interviews (AM, BM, CM1, CM2)

Semi-structured interview for managers

1. Role in the organization
- Describe your team and role
- Typical daily tasks and challenges

2. Team atmosphere
- What is are important factors in the atmosphere of a successful sales team?
- How are these factors evident in your own team?
- How can these factors be enhanced by team members? And by your manager?
- What are important aspects of good leadership in sales teams?

- What are your own personal greatest leadership challenges?
- What managerial actions do you deliberately do to direct your subordinates' attitudes to a certain direction?
- In what situations is it especially important to direct people?

3. Personal attitude towards failure and adversity
- What causes positive and negative feelings in your work?
- What causes positive and negative feelings in your subordinates' work?
- What are typical reasons for failure?
- Could the outcome often have been affected by doing something differently?
- Do you learn something from these situations?
- How do you think failures should be processed? What are your team's strengths and weaknesses?
- Do you have a process in place to intervene when if a salesperson starts to cumulatively lose deals?

4. Interaction within team
- Do you often share your failures with others?
- Is there competition within the team? Does it affect your willingness to share failures?
- Are there personal differences in how people experience failure?