

**BEHIND THE SCENES, OR AT LEAST BEHIND YOUR BACK:  
HIDDEN CONFLICT DURING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

A Thesis

by

JENNIFER LYNN SIEPEL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: Communication

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Approved by:

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**ABSTRACT**

Behind the Scenes, or At Least Behind Your Back: Hidden Conflict During an  
Organizational Change.

(May 2008)

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Throughout extant literature, there is a great deal of research on organizational change and organizational conflict; however, the two have rarely been studied together. Even less frequently studied is the existence and impact of hidden conflict during an organizational change.

This study seeks to explore the meeting of these bodies of literature through the use of qualitative methods. Fifteen interviews were triangulated with artifact data and participant observation to examine hidden conflict during an organizational change in a student organization of a large, southern university.

The organization studied had a long history of grassroots student leadership. However, per a directive of university administration, this pattern shifted. In order to comply with the new directive, the student leadership Council of the organization begrudgingly changed their structure. Many organizational members challenged the process taken to implement this change, not only because of the structural alteration it represented, but also for the lack of student input in developing the change plans.

This study revealed that throughout the change process, organizational members used hidden conflict strategies extensively. These individuals aimed their hidden conflict behaviors at other organizational members in protest of others' opinions of the change initiative. The use of hidden conflict behaviors had a significant impact on the change process and the efficacy of the organization as a whole. Most of the hidden conflict behaviors displayed are already identified in extant literature; however, this study also revealed new expressions of hidden conflict. In addition, this research explored the implications of emotion during an organizational change and the link between hidden conflict and resistance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee co-chair, Dr. Linda Putnam, for her invaluable support and guidance in completing this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Charles Conrad and Dr. Charles Samuelson for their input and direction in completing this project.

Special thanks go to the student organization studied in this project. I greatly appreciate the cooperation and openness they offered.

I want to give my family and friends my deepest gratitude for their unflagging love and encouragement as I completed this project. Their support has been truly remarkable.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
 CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Organizational Change.....	6
Organizational Change and Conflict.....	18
Conflict.....	21
Summary .....	31
Research Questions .....	32
III DESIGN OF STUDY.....	33
Organizational Case .....	33
General Approach .....	42
Interviews .....	46
Artifact Data.....	48
Participant Observation .....	49
Data Analysis .....	50
Summary .....	52
IV RESULTS.....	54
The Environment of the Change .....	54
Hidden Conflict as the Sharing of Information and Opinions .....	60
Hidden Conflict as a Means of Connection .....	68
Hidden Conflict as Anger and Bitterness.....	74

CHAPTER	Page
Hidden Conflict as a Form of Disconnect.....	84
Summary .....	88
V DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	91
Research Question One .....	91
Research Question Two .....	100
Research Question Three .....	104
Implications of Research.....	111
Limitations .....	120
Suggestions for Future Research.....	124
Conclusions .....	125
REFERENCES.....	129
APPENDIX A .....	136
APPENDIX B .....	137
APPENDIX C .....	138
APPENDIX D.....	139
APPENDIX E.....	140
VITA .....	146

**LIST OF FIGURES**

FIGURE	Page
4.1 The Four Stages of the SUC Change .....	60
5.1 Contexts of Individual and Group Enactments of Hidden Conflict.....	94
5.2 Hidden Conflict Strategies and Emotion during the Phases of the Change	104
5.3 Models of the Process of Emotion .....	114
A.1 SUC Student Organization Chart .....	136



**LIST OF TABLES**

TABLE	Page
2.1 Communicative Forms and Covert Conflict Strategies.....	26
3.1 The History of the SUC Structure .....	39
E.1 Example of Data Analysis Chart .....	140

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“The only thing constant is change”. This saying, while trite, is true and applies to many facets of life and none more so than organizations. A search on Amazon.com for books relating to organizational change will reveal no fewer than 4,090 options on the subject from both theoretical and practical perspectives, which indicates the prevalence and importance of the issue in today’s society. Organizational change has been a significant development in the area of organizational studies since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Leavitt, 1965). Many facets of organizational change have been delineated for more in-depth study, such as varieties of organizational change, inter-organizational locations of change and the relationship between the process of changing and the final change. In addition to these elements of change, aspects of organizational change have been studied in conjunction with other issues pertinent to organizational life. The list of these subjects is seemingly endless ranging from emotion to agency to timing to environment.

One area, however, that is noticeably absent is that of organizational conflict. Like change, conflict is an expected facet of life, particularly when individuals are expected to come together to work in organizations (Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Anstey, 1999; Pondy, 1967). As Bartunek, Kolb, and Lewicki (1992) explain, “conflict is part of the social fabric of organizations” (p. 217). Conflict in organizations can be viewed as

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This thesis follows the style of *Management Communication Quarterly*.

either positive or negative (Deutsch, 1969), and even regarded as a source of change (Putnam, 1988). It is at this juncture that it would be expected for these two bodies of literature – organizational change and conflict – to intersect. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily the case. Very little work has been done on the intersection of these topics, and the research that has investigated the relationship between these two constructs has tended to focus on how conflict can be used to initiate or strengthen a change initiative rather than the conflict that arises among organizational members as a result of an organizational change (Bartunek et al, 1992).

This study seeks to delve into pairing these research foci in a novel way. First, the majority of research on organizational change has focused on the issue in a mechanistic manner; that is, how the change is executed or what areas of the organization are changed. Subsequently, the understanding of how change is experienced by organizational members, especially those involved in the change initiative, is significantly lacking (Bartunek, 2003). This study seeks to explore the way in which organizational members experience the change process on a personal level, particularly through the use of conflict. Second, whereas a majority of the existing literature on organizational conflict, especially during an organizational change, tends to focus on overt expressions of conflict, this study is intended to explore the expression of conflict under the surface. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective allows for a better understanding of the difference between these two forms of conflict. The dramaturgical perspective contends that people act in two different spaces – the front stage (public) or backstage (private). Therefore, typical conflict studies examine how

individuals enact conflict in public spaces in which their behaviors are visible to all around them (front stage); however, hidden conflict occurs either in private interactions or secretly in public interactions so that the actions are imperceptible as conflictual to others (backstage). Hidden conflict has been shown to be present in organizations (Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Morrill, 1995), but little research has examined its place during an organizational change. The research that has been done has examined these processes as covert or overlooked actions (Marshawk, 2006), an approach which implies subversive intentions either on the part of the actor or the spectator. However, this research will instead seek to explore the ways in which hidden conflict is used and experienced by organizational members as they and their organization undergo a significant organizational change. In so doing, strategies for hidden conflict will be examined with the hopes of understanding exactly how hidden conflict is enacted, while also allowing for the potential of uncovering previously unidentified hidden conflict behaviors.

This study therefore intends to investigate how members of an organization's governing body experienced and enacted hidden conflict during a significant organizational change. Specifically, utilizing interpretive methods, this study analyzes the presence and role of hidden conflict in an organizational change and the potential link between these two organizational phenomena. The findings offer the possibility of a greater understanding of hidden conflict, organizational change and the effect one has on the other. This enlightenment would not only assist in theory development regarding these constructs, but also on the broader relation of conflict during organizational change, an area which is currently greatly understudied. This theoretical understanding

would also provide valuable information for practical applications. By allowing practitioners to be aware of how organizational members experience hidden conflict and change, researchers can help identify these behaviors before they have the potential to become disruptive.

To attain these understandings, this research will examine hidden conflict during an organizational change in a student organization on the campus of large public university. Chapter II examines previous research pertaining to organizational change as a process and a final outcome. In particular, it examines the relationship between organizational change and conflict during change initiatives. Last is a discussion of hidden conflict in organizations and the strategies for hidden conflict as they have been identified and operationalized in the extant literature and the presentation of the research questions that guided this project. Chapter III will present a detailed description of the methodology used to conduct this research and analyze the subsequent data. Chapter IV presents the findings of the data analysis. Finally, Chapter V will offer the implications of this work, conclusions which can be drawn from it and its potential for future research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As Van Maanen (1992) states, “Conflict often arises in the most unlikely places. Couples dining out in plush surroundings..., the family outing to Disneyland..., the backyard barbeques of long summer evenings...Few situations, it seems, are inherently so happy, so peaceful, or so calm as to always drive out discord” (p. 32). Given this list of seemingly idyllic situations that can be marred by conflict, it is easy to understand how organizations are equally, if not more, ripe for conflictual situations. Conflicts are inherently relational and often the result of the disputants’ concern for receiving their desired outcome and the implications of the conflict for future interactions with others (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005). These concerns are relevant in organizational life as organizational members must balance their own needs with those of the organization. Therefore, when an organization must undergo a change initiative, conflict will naturally follow. Even though conflict is necessary for any change, in organizations it is often difficult for organizational members to deal with the conflict inherent in the change process (Bartunek & Reid, 1992). Subsequently, individuals may choose to approach conflictual situations in a subtle way, choosing to use hidden conflict strategies rather than overt displays of conflict. It is at this point that conflict and organizational change intersect.

The purpose of this literature review is to consider the possible significant relationships between organizational change and hidden conflict. After exploring organizational change, a brief overview of organizational change and conflict research

will be discussed, followed by an examination of research on hidden conflict during organizational change. The following section will introduce organizational change and lay the groundwork for this proposal.

### **Organizational Change**

Over the past half century the study of organizations has encompassed a variety of issues. One of the most prominent issues has been that of organizational change. Considering the constantly shifting nature of current society, the intense interest in change is understandable, particularly when one accepts the realization that such a situation can be perceived in two oppositional lights – as the necessary tool to avoid organizational demise or as a disruptive force that hinders organizational process and efficiency (Lourenço, 1976; Haveman, 1992; Amburgery, Kelly, & Barnett, 1993). This fascination with change has been embraced by scholars from a variety of fields, with organizational studies being no exception. Interestingly, many of the theories and conceptualizations of change utilized in the realm of organizational studies were born of fields other than communication (Poole, Van de Ven, Dooley, & Holmes 2000; Struckman & Yammarino, 2003; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). The original causes of modern organizational change can arguably be traced to the era of industrialization when issues of efficiency through technology and administration became of foremost concern to businesses. This was an ideological shift that ultimately resulted in modifications to existing organizational structures and hence the birth of the modern organization (Chandler, 1962). Burns and Stalker (1961) explained that Marxist ideologies contend “technical progress underlies every kind of change in the social order” while Durkheim,

maintained that “technical progress is the outcome of changes in the institutions of society” (p. 19).

From the beginning of the era of organizational change research in the early to mid-twentieth century, some of the most pertinent issues revolved around three distinct approaches to organizational change – people, technological and structural (Leavitt, 1965). While these may appear to be rather similar to those studied in today’s literature, the approach to studying these forms of change was more broad-based and simplified than current research strategies. For instance, the technological changes referenced in this research regarded the shift from “eye-hand and muscle jobs” (p. 1149), most often typified by studies in early Taylor scientific management, to more modern office jobs (Leavitt, 1965). The 1960s and 1970s were exemplified by research relating to structural and technological shifts within organizations (Bennis, 1966; Donaldson, 1996). Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, issues of environmental differences and their subsequent impacts on organizations, as well as the inertia of change moved to the forefront of change research (Amburgey, Kelly, & Barnett, 1993; Dannemiller & Jacobs, 1992; Drazin, Glynn, Kazanjian, 2004; Haveman, 1992). In more recent years, research has focused on issues of organizational learning, timing, organizational culture, resistance and participation as they pertain to the change process (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001; Struckman & Yammarino, 2003). Additionally, many scholars are calling for a greater link between academic research and the traditions of practitioners (Struckman & Yammarino, 2003). Current conceptualizations of organizational change tend to revolve around one of the three elements of organizational change “(1) difference (2) at different



temporal moments, (3) between states of an organizational unit or system” (Poole, 2004, p. xi-xii).

The expanse of research on this general subject of organizational change is immense; however, many researchers argue that a great deal of this work is merely a regurgitation of previous research with few new contributions to the existing body of knowledge (Struckman & Yammarino, 2003; Weick and Quinn, 1999). One of the most enduring questions in the research of organizational change is what to study – the process of changing or the change itself (Bennis, 1966; Poole, 2004). Subsequently, for decades, research has attempted to embrace this argument by either choosing one side or attempting to bring both together. This attempt to create a separation between these two constructs seems to be creating a false dichotomy. Since an organizational change requires both of these elements, it naturally follows that in order to understand this phenomenon, one must also understand each of its requisite parts in concert with the other. This study assumes the position that the process of change and the actual change must be studied in unison for the most thorough understanding. Therefore, before the process of a change can be made clear, the kind of change that is occurring must first be considered.

### *The Change*

Organizational change research is demarcated not only by questions of studying the process of change or the change itself; the course of an organizational change can be strongly influenced by the person or situation that initializes the change. The organizational situation will often determine whether the change is initiated within the

organization for self-reflexive improvement or by external forces for corrective action. Initial interest in this subject began with understanding changes initiated internally but gradually shifted to address changes prompted by external forces (Seo et al., 2004).

Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch (1974) identified and delineated two primary forms of change – first- and second order. First-order changes are small changes that occur incrementally over time to singular parts of the organization. Second-order changes, however, are radical, large-scale changes that affect the underlying structure or sets of assumptions that define the purpose and culture of the organization. Even though these two approaches address the majority of organizational changes, the binary created does not leave room for the ability to transcend the current organizational setting so as to consider the situation from a new perspective. In an effort to mend this problem, Bartunek and Moch (1987) proposed a third-order change that calls for organizational constituents to work together to transcend the existing constrictive perspectives of the organization and its change initiative. Instead they recommend that individuals view the organizational change situation from fresh viewpoints so that they can propose the most productive strategies for approaching and executing the change. This approach was not accepted as widely as the notion of first- and second-order changes (Bartunek & Moch, 1994). Subsequently, the majority of recent research on organizational change has focused on second-order changes, (Seo et al., 2004) most likely because they are easier to anticipate and follow than first-order changes.

Each of these areas of research, while significant, is inconsequential without an understanding of the context in which change occurs. Therefore the framework offered

by Leavitt (1965) to understand the three basic forms of organizational change will be used to explore different kinds of organizational change. In attempting to delineate these varying forms of organizational change, there are often areas of overlap or uncertainty. The division between technological change, which has traditionally noted the ways that new technology, such as computers, affect organizations and changes in organizational structure has proved to be particularly difficult. Cummings and Worley (1997) even went so far as to title this lack of distinction as a “technostructural” change and define the concept as encompassing “organization structure and...better [integration of] people and technology” (p. 21). While the distinction between technological and structural changes may be difficult to make, for the purposes of this study, it is important to make such a distinction, especially considering that many changes in organizational structure are precipitated by events completely unrelated to issues of technological innovation or approaches to human capital.

When considering people during an organizational change, a great deal of research focuses on issues of education for acceptance (Margulies & Raia, 1978; Struckman & Yammarino, 2003). Most of the literature tended to place emphasis on people as employees and therefore the recipients to a change that was out of their hands, rather than treating individuals as potential change agents. Much of the practical research addressed issues of communication of change plans and methods to prevent resistance from those on whom the changes are forced.

In contrast, current research related to human capital as it pertains to organizational change includes that which was noted by Poole (2004) that “the issue

indexed by *people* is the role of human agency in change and innovation” (p. 17). Most of the current theories addressing issues of organizational change accept some preconceived stance on the type and importance of agency in the change process, such as whether the agent is considered an individual, the organization or some combination of influence provided by the two. This departs rather significantly from the earlier research that concentrated on organizational members as passive receivers to a change effort.

The issue of agency is also a key feature in the research on structural change. This research focused on the agency granted to organizations and management as the impetus for the change in organizational structure, as well as the process and the subsequent structural form which was believed to impact efficiency. Later studies concentrated more on changes prompted by the desire to conform to expectations of organizational form based upon traditional convention, as well as the impact that structure has on efficacy and subsequently survival (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 2004). As Nutt and Backoff (1997) describe, during a second order change “innovation leads change by searching for agreement about what the ends should be and then considering how the organization could be changed to meet these new expectations” (p. 239). Such a description matches the circumstances of the case to be utilized for the research, as well.

Drazin, Glynn, and Kazanjian (2004) argue that even though a lack in recent developments may appear to be the beginning of the end of research on structural change, with a new perspective, a renaissance of interest in this area could begin. Nutt (2003) proposed the examination of change via the “structure-process duality” – the desire to either understand the change itself, or to understand how that change occurs; an

approach that reintroduces one of the key debates of change research, thus bringing the issue full circle by reestablishing an interest in understanding the relationship between structure and process as they appear in an organizational change. As such, it is equally important to understand key tenets of an organizational change process. This study embraces the structure-process duality as a means to understand organizational change but does not focus on technological change. It embraces the structural change through examining the way an organization implements a change in a matrix organizational structure and focuses on the process through an understanding of the timing surrounding the situation – a key element of understanding change processes.

### *Change Process*

The study of a change process is not only important for understanding the mechanics of such a situation, but knowing what occurs during a change process and sharing this information with organizational constituents is important for a successful implementation of an organizational change (Van Knippenberg et al., 2006). Studies of organizational change processes have changed significantly since Lewin (1951) introduced the unfreeze-change-refreeze model. Many current conceptualizations of organizational change adhere to a model that organizations must first make a choice to be open to change, then make these changes and finally reset in this new pattern. However, this approach only considers the basic mechanics of an organizational change. It fails to take into consideration other elements of a change process.

One area of increasing interest in change process research is the timing of an intervention. Research tends to classify the timing of changes into one of two categories

– continuous or episodic. Such a classification is seemingly contiguous with that of the division between first- and second-order changes. The concept of continuous change indicates a sense of consistency (first-order), while the episodic change signifies that the ensuing change was necessarily more interventional (second-order).

These two approaches to timing, much like the understandings of first- and second-order changes, tend to be approached as an incommensurable binary. Episodic change is described as “infrequent, slower because of its wide scope, less complete because it is seldom fully implemented, more strategic in its content, more deliberate and formal than emergent change, more disruptive because programs are replaced rather than altered, and initiated at higher levels in the organization” (Mintzberg & Westley, 1992 in Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 368). While continuous change encompasses issues such as “change through ongoing variations in practice, cumulation of variations, continuity in place of dramatic discontinuity, continuous disequilibrium as variations beget variations, and no beginning or end point” (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 377). Some scholars view episodic change as a negative way to approach a change process while continuous change is seen as the preferred method (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997).

Some researchers argue that planned (episodic) changes are often the result of an organization’s inability to maintain a flexible, continuously evolving environment (Dunphy, 1996). However, such a perspective fails to take into account changes spurred by external factors beyond the control of an organization. However, punctuated equilibrium addresses this issue by advancing an approach to change timing that allows for both incremental, continuous change and radical episodic change. This theoretical

framework advances an approach that claims organizations can undergo small, consistent changes when they are not capable of achieving significant transformation which results in a rather consistent organizational equilibrium. However, this perspective also allows for possibility of initiating radical planned changes at key points when circumstances require the organization to drastically adapt (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). An organization's acceptance of this form of organizational change indicates an awareness of the continuously shifting environment in which it must operate. This cognizance will ultimately affect other ways the organization handles the change process.

A key to understanding not only the process of change, but also its possible outcome, relates to the manner in which the organization approaches the change. If the organization allows its employees to know, and even be involved in the change process, the likelihood of the change attempt being successful greatly increases (Manring, 2003). However, in contrast, if an organization chooses to keep the proceedings of the change process privileged to just a few, it is quite probable that those not included will resent the exclusion, possibly resulting in a failed change attempt (Fedor, Caldwell, & Herold, 2006; Ford & Pasmore, 2006).

Maintaining an open environment before and during an organizational change is dependent upon the inclusion of as many organizational constituents as possible. This involvement is often achieved through frequent and open communication as well as a willingness to experiment with a variety of approaches prior to making a final decision. When an organization allows for flexibility and experimentation during a change,

organizational members will be able to observe the process because of the organization's candor in determining the best course of action. Such openness in the process allows for interpretation and feedback from constituents as they experience the various shifts and alterations presented to them (Karim, 2006). This process is further advanced with extensive, honest communication. Van Knippenberg et al. (2006) argue that an important element of a change process is allowing employees "the opportunity to have some control over their own work situation" (p. 688), a situation dependent upon "the extent to which organizational communication about the change...addresses employees' concerns and interests" (p. 686). To achieve this necessary level of communication, the change must be perceived as an on-going process rather than an end in itself by creating opportunities for all interested parties to share an opinion (Langer & Thorup, 2006). This is most often achieved through an easily accessible means of communication such as storytelling. Through this method, individuals are able to use communicative mechanisms, like "humor and self-irony", that they feel are the most comfortable to express their opinions (Langer & Thorup, 2006, p. 373). The fostering of an environment of this type maintains the lines of communication that allow for an open change process.

Even if lines of communication are open during a change process, and even more if they are not, there are often negative unintended consequences of such a significant alteration in the lives of organizational members. As many scholars have noted, individuals' identities tend to be intertwined with organizational membership (Cheney, 1983; Larson & Pepper, 2003). Therefore, it would be expected for organizational



members to develop strong emotional ties to their positions. Thus, when changes threaten an individual's place in an organization, and ultimately his or her identity, they often have negative physical and emotional reactions. Bartunek (1993) noted that during the transition of individuals into new organizational roles, members experienced illness and physical stress which had a reciprocal effect on the change itself. These negative reactions subsequently affected the change negatively as the organizational members were unable to fulfill their responsibilities for furthering the change initiative.

Researchers rarely address negative physical reactions to change initiatives, even though scholarship on emotional reactions to change has increased.

Much like actual organizational changes, emotional reactions to change have been found to be processual, as well. Liu and Perrewé (2005) argued that the process begins as individuals make an initial appraisal of the situation and are left with mixed emotions as they attempt to navigate the situation and its pending implications. Once preliminary impressions about the change are developed, the process continues to a secondary evaluation at which point an organizational member begins to develop an emotional reaction to change initiative. As would be expected, those who are more intimately involved with the change process perceive the outcomes of the change as personally beneficial and have more positive emotions regarding the situation, while those who are not as involved or feel that they are personally disadvantaged by the change tend to have negative reactions to the situation (Liu & Perrewé, 2005; Bartunek et al., 2006). Once these emotional reactions have been developed, individuals then begin to enact coping strategies complementary to their emotional states. At this point in

the emotional process, individuals, informed by their initial and secondary appraisals and chosen coping strategies, make a decision about how to continue in relation to the organization. For instance, those who experienced anger or embarrassment are likely to exit the organization; those who are either simply frustrated, happy or have immense pride in the organization are more likely to give their opinions on the change openly; those who are sad about the change are likely to withdraw physically and emotionally from organizational activities; and those who are happy, proud or feel a sense of guilt because of their role in the organization tend to withhold their opinions for the benefit of the organization (Liu & Perrewé, 2005). This processual model describes the ways that individuals formulate their emotions regarding the change, however, there is other literature – primarily in popular practice literature – that likens the emotions individuals experience during an organizational change to those of Kübler-Ross's (1969) grief process. For instance, Craine (2007) identified four emotional stages during a change cycle that begins with a "comfort zone" prior to the change that includes feelings of confidence and boredom; then changes to what he terms the "no zone" once the change is introduced that leaves organizational members feeling shock, anger and denial; followed by the "chasm" as individuals attempt to find their place in the new organizational structure and feel the depression, anxiety and the need to bargain; and concludes with the "go zone" once individuals comes to terms with the change process and begin to flourish in the new situation by feeling acceptance, excitement and a desire to implement the change. Though these emotions are experienced on an individual level, the impact of the feelings of others on one's own emotional state, or the emotional

contagion, can also have a bearing on how one reacts emotionally to an organizational change (Bartunek et al., 2006; Crosetto, 2004). From this brief overview, it is clear that the organizational change literature covers much more than the mechanics of either change types or change processes, but instead, much more enters into an organizational change initiative.

### **Organizational Change and Conflict**

While the organizational change literature is immense, the existing conflict literature is similarly expansive. Therefore, the combination of the two is understandably dense. Interestingly, there are several similarities between the study of organizational change and the study of conflict, thus making the intersection of the two a natural progression in the understanding of organization. One of the most distinct similarities between the organizational conflict and change literatures is the division between structure leading to conflict and the actual process of conflict, much like the distinction between the structure that leads to an organizational change and the actual process of changing (Thomas, 1976).

However, some scholars believe that there is little relation between change and conflict. For instance, Neimark (1992) stated, “conflict is a vehicle for stability, and not...a means of structural transformation.” (p. 49) However, this is not the dominant perspective. Others believe that the relationship between conflict and change is somewhat circular. A long-held assumption about this relationship is that “change precipitates conflict, while conflict often engenders change” (Blau & Scott, 1962 in

Haveman, 1992 p. 49). This somewhat interdependent relationship makes a distinction between these two constructs difficult.

As such, issues of conflict during organizational change are rarely discussed overtly in the literature. Extant research has found that during the stress of an organizational change, organizational members may use outward expressions of conflict (Andersen, 2006). More typically though, the issues of organizational change and conflict are addressed in the literature much as they are most often experienced in an actual organizational setting. As Boulding (1963) states “[group] conflicts either tend to be below the surface of consciousness...or if they do rise to the surface of consciousness, they frequently produce organizations and, hence, transform themselves into organizational conflicts” (p. 400). Subsequently, elements of conflict during organizational changes are often approached as resistance, which is a subject found broadly throughout organizational change literature.

A variety of reasons for resistance to organizational changes have been proposed. Most forms of resistance are performed secretly in what some call “hidden transcripts” or the discourse that occurs outside the sight of power holders in an organization (Murphy, 1998). Some researchers argue that certain resistance mechanisms, such as gossip, are typically viewed as a negative form of organizational discourse while others claim that it can be used to aid organizational constituents make sense of a situation and create a shared experience (Hafen, 2004; Myers, 2002). Resistance is often an attempt to reduce cognitive conflict, especially about how one perceives his or her role and identity within an organization when it is threatened during an organizational change (Fiol &

O'Connor, 2002; Van Knippenberg et al., 2006). This practice would seem especially pertinent to changes in organizational structure because structures often dictate how organizational constituents approach their positions. This situation is attributed to the dependent relationships between positions within the organizational structure based on similar or linked responsibilities (Gupta, Dirsmith, & Fogarty, 1994; Gossett & Kilker, 2006). A shift in structure, if it occurred during change, may result in an alteration to one's position in the organization and subsequently their identities, something many members prefer to resist. As such, "the very characteristics that give an organization stability also generate resistance to change and reduce the probability of change" (Amburgey et al., 1993, p. 52). Resistance emanates from individuals as they react to the organizational change.

Resistance strategies tend to be focused on sending a desired message to an organization as a whole, to some specific organizational action or to a symbolic representative of the organization. Definitions of hidden conflict strategies, however, focus more on conflicts between individuals as they are inspired by organizational tensions and situations and are more concentrated on personal reasons or the personal release of tensions which affect the organization's experiencing of change. As such, this study will not focus on resistance, but rather on hidden conflict because the interest of this work is less focused on individual's perceptions of the organization, but rather the interaction and communication between organizational members.

## **Conflict**

Before the concept of hidden conflict can be fully understood, one must first be familiar with the basic tenets of conflict in general. Conflict in this study refers to “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a result of this incompatibility” (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005, p. 4). Conflict typically develops in stages. Pondy (1967) created one of the most well known models for conflict development. According to his model, during the first or latent stage, the seeds of conflict are planted and the groundwork is laid. When the involved parties begin to reach an awareness that something is wrong, they begin to experience perceived conflict. Once the parties feel unhappy or uncomfortable with the situation, they have reached the felt conflict stage. As the conflictual situation continues to evolve, the parties begin the manifest conflict stage during which they seek information or make accusations related to their perceived incompatibility. The end of the manifest interaction sets of the stage for the next interaction or confrontation of the involved parties in what is known as the aftermath.

As individuals work through conflicts, they are faced with choices of how to approach the situation. Numerous typologies attempt to explain why individuals approach conflict in a certain manner. Most, however, are dependent upon a “two-dimensional framework” separating one’s concern for self from one’s concern for others that “then applies different labels and descriptions to five key points.” (Lewicki, Saunders, Barry, & Minton, 2004, p. 19). Some scholars argue that the conflict management strategy an individual chooses is based upon one’s emotional state during

the conflict (Bell & Song, 2005; Desivilya & Yagil, 2005). Typically, the choice is based on how important the issue is to the parties, their relationships to each other, the amount of time to work on the conflict, and the potential for future interactions (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005). Conflict is an inherently emotional process and the communication of these emotions has an impact on the development of conflict (Jones, 2001). When considering how emotions can be expressed during a conflictual situation, it would be easy to believe that all conflicts can be easily observed; however, not all conflicts are enacted in an overt, easily viewable space.

### *Hidden Conflict*

Though a great deal of research has involved issues relating to conflict, little has been done to understand conflict existing under the surface during an organizational change process. Kolb and Putnam (1992) indicate that conflict is a natural and inherent element of organizational life and that though “differences may be publicly aired, the vast majority occur out of sight and in forms other than official negotiation or grievance processing” (p. 2). They subsequently call for further study into the daily lives of organizational members to gain a better understanding of such situations. This interest in the covert actions of individuals as a result of interorganizational disputes added a new dimension to the understanding not only of conflict behavior, but also of organizational life. In an early study of failed organizational change, Lourenco (1976) distinguished between overt and covert conflicts by defining overt conflict as “interference with the outcomes of others” while covert conflict was considered

“hostility that interferes with the outcomes of others only insofar as no overt action takes place” (p. 1194).

As Marshawk (2006) describes, “covert processes are a crucial aspect of organizational change and, when not made explicit, they can block even the best intentions” (p. 1). This analysis of covert, or hidden, processes during organizational change is acutely pertinent to conflict. Scholars have developed a variety of typologies in an effort to track how individuals approach and react to covert conflicts (Morrill & Thomas, 1992; Jehn, 1997).

Despite this proclivity to ignore expressions of hidden conflict, Morrill and Thomas (1992) delineated among three primary forms of escalation beginning with grievance, escalating to conflict, and ending with the disputing. While this is one of a myriad of approaches, one of the primary elements of this piece was the categorization of ways in which individuals within organizations chose to address covert conflicts. The authors identified fifteen categories that fit their criteria of observability, authoritativeness and aggressiveness based on extensive reviews of literature from anthropological and sociological research. The resulting categorizations offer an interesting classification of conflict. Of the fifteen behavior categories, seven depict the dichotomy of overt and covert processes. Even though these are not directly linked to elements of organizational change, the acceptance of their existence is significant for research in this area.

A few studies focused direction on the integration between organizational change and hidden conflict. Bartunek and Reid (1992) sought to identify the causes and



manifestations of the conflicts resulting from the organizational change. Their study indicated that general societal and cultural expectations about organizational change demand that individuals remain civil and not engage in overt displays of conflict – actions often viewed as uncivilized or immature because of an inability to control one’s emotions. The results of their research indicated that this pattern of behavior will ultimately lead to the continuation of similar behavior patterns and no significant organizational change because the consistent suppression of overt expressions of conflict leads to defeatist attitudes among organizational members and the belief that instigation of conflict privately will be entirely ineffectual (Bartunek and Reid, 1992). Ironically, Friedman (1994) notes that the importance of maintaining composure in public and acting out conflict in private is directly oppositional to the expectations for behavior in negotiation settings. He states “while conflict is expressed in public, understanding is built up in private” (p. 111). Instances when traditional manifestations of conflict should be shown in public versus when these same displays are strongly discouraged, introduce an obvious discrepancy in current understandings of conflict. Learning how these patterns are enacted during the process of an organizational change could hold potential for a better understanding of organizational behavior in general.

Building on Morrill and Thomas (1992), research scholars have developed typologies of hidden conflict. These categories have shed new light on often unconsidered elements of conflict. For instance, Morrill (1995) examined expressions of conflict as it occurred outside of the public eye at large corporations among those persons nearest the top of the organizational hierarchy. He found actions such as non-

confrontational retaliation, alienation, false ignorance, secret complaining, surveillance, private insults, reassignments, and sabotage to be some of the common means through which conflict was handled in these circumstances. The choice of conflict strategy was contingent upon one's position in the organization and that position in relation to the position of the other individual in the conflict. Most of these strategies were intended to punish the other party for their role in the conflict situation, while others were used to enact a conflict behavior without doing so overtly to avoid tension or the potential of retaliation (Morrill, 1995). These findings, in conjunction with those of Bartunek and Reid (1992) seem to indicate that hidden conflict is rather ineffectual during an organizational change because the actions are done with the intent of secrecy, thus, negating any potential of impact on the change.

Other forms of hidden conflict, such as gossip and "bitching" have been studied extensively for their role in organizational interactions (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999; Hafen, 2004). However, this area of research has most often been in the context of organizational efficacy, and not in the context of organizational change. The recognition of these expressions of conflict gives credence to hidden or covert conflict as an area of study. Few large compilations of such typologies have been conducted. However, Anstrand (2006) noted a division among the existing typologies into two different forms – communicative forms and covert conflict strategies. Communicative forms refer to the communicative acts used to express hidden conflict, while covert conflict strategies are forms of covert action used in conflict situations. These approaches form the following

compilation of widely used categorizations of behaviors during a hidden conflict which can be found in Table 2.1 below (Anstrand, 2006, p. 18).

Table 2.1: Communicative Forms and Covert Conflict Strategies

<b>Communicative Forms</b>	
Gossip	Speaking about another person or people “behind their back” and without their knowledge, usually done with a negative connotation.
Complaining/bitching/ venting	Getting things “off your chest” by sharing frustrations with someone who would listen.
Surveillance	Keeping tabs on someone else’s actions, usually a tally of wrongs to be used against the person being surveyed.
Ignoring Requests	Purposeful neglect of clearly stated requests, often to convey disagreement with and opposition to the requestor.
Delaying Response	Purposefully lengthening of response time to clearly-stated requests, often to convey disagreement with and opposition to the requestor.
Hidden Agendas	Formulation of a covert plan or idea regarding ways to antagonize an unfavorable person or persons.
Lumping It	Taking personal offenses by others and internalizing them.
<b>Covert Conflict Strategies</b>	
Accommodation	Going along with someone even if it causes internal discord, in order to avoid confrontation or disagreement.
Tolerance	“Putting up with someone” out of a feeling of pressure or duty despite personal preference or choice.
Avoidance	Purposefully evading contact with a person or persons as much as possible.
Strategic Alienation	Purposefully targeting an individual or individuals to avoid all contact and send a message of displeasure to the offender.
Coalition Building	Forming agreement with other persons in a similar situation to work toward a specific goal.
Retaliation	“Getting back” at someone for a previous offense.
Sabotage	Attacking someone outright, and usually very distinctly by surprise, in response to a previous offense.

As this table indicates, there are many varieties of hidden conflict behaviors. In order to develop a deeper understanding of these behaviors as they have been studied, some of the more common forms of hidden conflict will be discussed in greater depth.

### *Gossip*

The extant literature examines gossip as an informal, personal and intimate form of communication that can express personal frustrations or share organizational/social rules, values and expectations (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999; Hafen, 2004). Similarly, the stories shared through gossip serve as cautionary tales for unindoctrinated members of the organization so that they will learn what should make them leery, while also acting as a mechanism to create and maintain organizational identities (Myers, 2002) The primary focus of gossip as hidden conflict is to share information about the reputations of organizational members so as to cast oneself in a positive light, to create alliances through social connections and to learn about organizational expectations (Morrill, 1995). When viewed as a practice of resistance, gossiping behavior is considered a gendered practice (Hafen 2004); however, in hidden conflict that link is not always made.

### *Bitching*

Like gossip, individuals express their displeasure through complaining. Jones (1990) in Sotirin and Gottfried (1999) identified bitching as making complaints about a situation or an individual, usually done in private or semi-private settings. Bitching is a way to “[retell] event or [make] observations about people and conditions that highlight personal affronts, injustices, and violations” with “a tone of moral indignation” (Sotirin

& Gottfried, 1999, p. 58). It has also been considered “when an aggrieved party complains to a third party about the behavior of an offender without the offender’s knowledge” (Baumgartner, 1984 in Morrill & Thomas, 1992). Like gossip, most studies treated bitching/complaining as a stereotypically gendered behavior most often used by women. However, other studies observe this behavior among men, though it is perceived as a form of sociability rather than a means of complaining (Trujillo, 1985 in Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). Regardless of the gendered aspect, bitching is typically perceived negatively and not as an acceptable form of behavior. This perception could be related to the common belief that bitching is a form of resistance.

### *Surveillance*

A more personal way that individuals convey their grievances is through surveillance. Morrill (1995) defined this behavior as “the systematic gathering of information by aggrieved parties about those against whom they have grievances. Partners also refer to these actions as ‘watching’ or ‘keeping tabs on an offender’” (p. 162). It was found that these behaviors, which are at times difficult to identify because of their private, personal natures, will often dissipate once the aggrieved finds other issues to address (Morrill, 1992, 1995).

### *Toleration*

While some individuals act on their grievances, albeit covertly, others wish to avoid overt actions. One way this is accomplished is by tolerating the grievances, often called, “lumping it.” Morrill and Thomas (1992) defined this action as “endurance and inaction by an aggrieved party against an offender” (p. 407). It was found to be one of

the most commonly used methods of hidden conflict (Morrill, 1995). Enacted in a variety of ways, tolerance exists in a variety of organizational situations. It is most often exemplified through behaviors such as “virtually never [talking] back and, despite grumbling for what are seen as the foibles of senior officers, [grievants perform] most of their required tasks in civil and competent ways” (Van Maanen, 1992, p. 55). However, the use of toleration prevents the potential for changing the situation which perpetuates the conflict (Martin, 1992; Bartunek, et al., 1992).

### *Avoidance*

If tolerance proves to be too difficult, offended individuals might avoid those against whom they have concerns. The hidden conflict strategy most frequently used (Morrill, 1995), avoidance is “unilateral curtailment by an aggrieved party of all or some social interaction with an offender” (Morrill & Thomas, 1992, p. 406). When utilizing avoidance, there is a great deal of variability in what is avoided such as a conflict, a person or a potentially conflictual situation (Bartunek & Reid; Van Maanen, 1992). A potential reason for the popularity of this approach is its low aggressiveness and observability (Morrill & Thomas, 1992). However, as with tolerance, when disputants use avoidance to express a conflict covertly, structures are reinforced and the environment that allows conflicts to breed and fester is strengthened because of its ostensible acceptance (Martin, 1992; Bartunek, et al., 1992).

### *Strategic Alienation*

Whereas avoidance is divorcing oneself from a situation, researchers have identified strategic alienation as a similar behavior, intentionally leaving others from an

organizational scenario, as a hidden conflict strategy. Based on a construct developed by Goffman (1967 in Morrill, 1995), alienation is “spontaneously [becoming] involved in unsociable solitary tasks” (p. 162). Examples of this behavior would include “stacking and restacking computer printouts or drawing intricate patterns on paper while colleagues are talking” rather than engaging in the conversation (Morrill, 1992, p. 103). While this is one definition of this hidden conflict behavior, it is also understood as excluding an individual or group from an organizational activity or other situation in which his or her presence would be expected (Bartunek & Reid, 1992).

### *Sabotage*

Some acts of strategic alienation previously described appear to be used as a “payback” for a particular grievance, though that is not always the intent. Instead, intentional acts of sabotage, surprise attacks on individuals and projects as a way for expressing displeasure with a previous injustice, are also a means of hidden conflict. Sabotage is an action that is often very difficult to trace (Prasad & Prasad, 1998). While sabotage can include grandiose attacks, such as bombings and mass product tampering, more often it is executed covertly. Rather, it can be operationalized as “aggressive covert retaliation by an aggrieved party against an offender” (Morrill & Thomas, 1992, p. 407). Examples include providing negative reviews of managers to ensure that their supervisors will punish them as a form of retribution for treatment of subordinates or giving superiors incorrect or incomplete information for a presentation they have to make (Morrill, 1989 & 1995). As Morrill (1989) explained, “this strategy can be used as

a tacit appeal for support in the face of a persistently annoying superior who has... ‘few redeeming qualities’” (p. 398).

### **Summary**

As this research indicates, relationships exist among these three bodies of literature – organizational change, organizational conflict and hidden conflict. However, it also raises questions regarding a number of issues not found in the existing research. The structure-process duality proposed by Nutt (2003) has been studied from the perspective of change mechanics but not from the way individuals experience both the change and the change process. Approaching research from this perspective is important, particularly when considering the relationship between organizational members’ perceptions and subsequent feelings during an organizational change (Liu & Perrewé, 2005; Bartunek, et al. 2006). Individuals’ satisfaction with a change initiative is not only influenced by the magnitude of the change, but also by the way conflicts during the change are managed (Bartunek, et al., 1992). When conflicts are kept private and hidden, change rarely occurs (Bartunek, et al, 1992); however, when an organizational change is already taking place, the conflict resulting from it is less understood. This is especially true for hidden conflict strategies. Several of these types of conflict have been identified, but few during a change process. The relationship between organizational changes and hidden conflict strategies needs further explorations. Therefore, these research questions guide this research.



**Research Questions**

RQ 1: What types and patterns of hidden conflict surface in this organizational change process?

RQ 2: How does an organizational change process in this case evolve over time to reveal differences in hidden conflict patterns?

RQ 3: What role do types and patterns of hidden conflict play in the organizational change process and how might they influence the change development?

The next chapter explores the context in which these questions are answered including the organization and participants involved in this study. Chapter III also describes the design of the study, methods for data collection and data analysis, the results of which are found in Chapter IV.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **DESIGN OF STUDY**

#### **Organizational Case**

The Student Union Center has been a landmark of this large southern public university for over 55 years. Originally erected for the purposes of a student union, as well as a memorial for current and former students lost in foreign wars, the name “Student Union Center” (SUC) has since assumed a duality of meaning – the structural building which houses the student union as well as the student organization known as the Student Programs Office, which provides programs and services for the campus and community.

The Programs Office of the Student Union Center Student is divided into two primary areas – program and administrative resource areas (See Appendix A for Organizational Chart). The SUC houses a number of student led committees, each with a different purpose designed to provide a variety of programs to both the campus and the surrounding communities. Despite the rather frequent fluctuation in number of committees, for the past two decades the SUC has housed approximately 30 different student organizations at any given time. The interests of these committees range from developing leadership skills in freshmen, to providing lecture series featuring prominent political figures, to offering concerts and other fine arts productions. Each of these committees maintains its own unique governing structure. To assist committees in their efforts, the administrative resource areas offer training and expertise in areas such as marketing, development and human resources. In addition, the Student Union Center

employs approximately 45 full-time employees. These non-student positions serve three primary functions – advisory roles to the committees, office staff and technical assistance such as accounting and computer operations to the committees and the organization as a whole.

Although it has undergone many changes through the decades, the governing body of this organization is the SUC Council. According to the SUC Constitution (2005, p. 8), “The purpose of the SUC Council, which shall report to the President of the University through the SUC Director and the Vice President for Student Affairs, shall be to serve as the governing body of the SUC, to formulate SUC general and specific policies, to guide the SUC officers and programming committees, and to advise the SUC operating departments. It shall also be responsible for seeing that the financial operations are consistent with stated purposes of the SUC.”

This council has traditionally consisted of current students, typically upper-classmen. During the 2006-2007 academic year, the Council was composed of twelve current students. Each of these positions is a one-year appointment and based on an extensive application and interview process. Since its inception, the Student Union Center has sought to “provide ‘hands on’ leadership and managerial experiences that lead to the development of effective skills for student civic leaders through involvement in the management of the facilities, services, and programs” (SUC Constitution). Intended to mirror corporate governing structures, the Council offers its members the opportunity to develop business world skills in a low pressure environment. The catchphrase “leadership laboratory” has been used to describe the Student Union Center

as a whole. This idiom supports the assertion made by permanent staff that even if students make a substantial error in their governing positions and leadership roles, they will not cause irreparable harm to the organization. As Steve, an SUC advisor stated, “I don’t mind when people make mistakes. It’s through mistakes that we learn.” This sense of independence in leadership experimentation has been a hallmark of the organization and one which its members treasure.

The SUC Council has undergone numerous changes in its 58-year existence. However, considering the frequent turnover of leadership because of the transitory nature of college students, the organizational memory regarding changes in organizational structure is weak. Subsequently, little documentation exists that describes the numerous changes in the organization and its leadership positions throughout the years. The history that exists is based upon the SUC Constitution and a database list of the positions within each SUC Council and the individuals who held those positions. As such, a chronological history of positions within the SUC Council will be described in the paragraphs below.

### *History*

A student union was created prior to the erection of a building to house this group. In 1950, SUC Director J. Wayne Stark established the first SUC Council. The original council was composed of only two students who held the President and Vice President positions with J. Wayne Stark, the director, holding the Secretary/Treasurer position. This pattern continued for twelve years until 1961 when a new position was created – Honorary Vice President – for non-students who had an interest in the

organization. This position was short-lived and replaced during the 18<sup>th</sup> Council by an Executive Vice President of Operations. In addition, three vice president positions specific to an area of governance were created (Programs, Recreation, Issues, etc.) with the exact titles changing slightly each year.

The next change came with the 25<sup>th</sup> Council, which granted governing responsibilities to a president, three vice presidents and three director positions of specific areas. For the next five years, this structure remained fairly consistent with only minor changes to the titles. However, a major change occurred in 1979 when the Council composition was modified to include a president, two vice presidents, six directors and one comptroller. It is clear that this structure was not as well received as anticipated in that it was abolished after only three years. At this juncture, the 34<sup>th</sup> Council introduced a more stringent organization with a president, two executive vice presidents and nine vice president positions. A slight change occurred with the 36<sup>th</sup> Council in 1985 with the addition of two students – another executive vice president and a vice president position. This basic organization remained in place for almost ten years. Throughout these changes, the committees existed and reported to one of the vice presidents. In 1993, the structure changed again to include four executive vice presidents, twelve vice presidents who would each report to one executive vice president, and seventeen directors who would report to one of the vice presidents. This basic concept remained intact for six years with only a few minor changes in the titles.

In 1999, with the 50<sup>th</sup> Council, a rather significant change occurred when the Council was restructured to include a president, six executive vice presidents, eight

executive directors and fifteen vice presidents. The vice president positions were separated into five sets of three. Each of these sets corresponded directly to one of the executive vice president positions – most of them were in administrative resource areas. Five of the executive director positions did the same. The remaining three executive director positions represented three primary areas of SUC programming interests– Arts and Entertainment; Educational Exploration; and Leadership, Development and Service. All of the committees were divided into one of these three categories. Subsequently, the executive director for each area oversaw each committee assigned to his/her area. To assist in this process, a vice president position which corresponded to one of the five administrative resource areas was assigned to each of the executive directors and programming areas. This change revealed a clear distinction between programming and administrative resource areas in the composition of the Council. This structure remained fairly consistent until the 54<sup>th</sup> Council in 2003-2004. At this time an additional executive vice president, executive director and vice president position were added to the administrative resource area of diversity. Another interesting change occurred during this time. This was the first time in decades that constituents external to the Student Union Center, such as the Student Body President, Corps Commander, former students and faculty were not included on the list of Council members. The next major change occurred in the early 2000s, when the SUC hired Accenture consulting firm to analyze the structure of the organization to ascertain a more efficient process, as well as one that more closely mirrored corporate trends to prepare students for the entrance to the workforce. Accenture concluded that the existing structure needed to be reorganized

into a matrix design. Additionally, the executive positions were renamed to corporate titles so as to adequately reflect the position and its responsibilities to potential employers of SUC members. For instance, the president and vice president of administration, as well as the vice president of operations were renamed Chief Executive Officer, Chief Administrative Officer and Chief Operations Officer. Thus, “executive” was also added to the vice president and director title. This change was met with a degree of resistance; however, no documents exist to explain this process or the specific objections raised to it. Rather, only the stories told by those present at the time of the shift (primarily staff members) or the recollections of those who were once present remain. The first year that the new matrix structure and nomenclature was implemented was in 2004-2005. The 55<sup>th</sup> Council remained in place with little problem, primarily because frequent turnover resulted in forgetting the issues discussed in opposition to the change.

A visual representation of the structural changes encountered by SUC throughout its over fifty year history can be found in Table 3.1 on the next page.

Table 3.1: The History of the SUC Structure

Academic Years	Positions on SUC Council
1950-1961	President, Vice President, Secretary/Treasurer
1961-1967	President, Vice President, Honorary Vice President
1967-1974	President, Vice President, Executive Vice President, three Vice Presidents of specific areas
1974-1979	President, three Vice Presidents of specific areas, three Directors of differing specific positions
1979-1980	President, two Vice Presidents of specific areas, six Directors of different specific areas, one comptroller
1983-1985	President, two Executive Vice Presidents of specific areas, six Vice Presidents of different areas
1985-1993	President, three Executive Vice Presidents of specific areas, seven Vice Presidents of different areas
1993-1999	President, four Executive Vice Presidents, twelve Vice Presidents of different positions, seventeen Directors of other unique positions
1999-2003	President, six Executive Vice Presidents, eight Executive Directors relating to the Executive Vice President positions, fifteen Vice Presidents that related to the Executive Director positions *First significant distinction between programming and administration
2003-2004	President, seven Executive Vice Presidents, nine Executive Directors relating to the Executive Vice President positions, sixteen Vice Presidents that related to the Executive Director positions
2004-2007	President, Chief Administrative Officer, Chief Operations Officer, eight Executive Vice Presidents (5 administrative, 3 programming), ~12 Executive Directors distributed among each Executive Vice President

### *The Change*

However, during the spring of 2006, one of the most significant changes to the Student Union Center Student Programs Office occurred. Per a directive from the Vice President of Student Affairs, the Student Union Center was granted governance over the University Center Complex – a conglomerate of several buildings on the campus,



including the university chapel, two buildings with meeting rooms and student activity offices and the main performance venues. Other student groups and campus/community entities use these buildings extensively. As such, discussions began behind closed doors to express concern for the lack of external input in the SUC governance process. The additional responsibilities had far-reaching consequences and could potentially undermine the credibility of any decision.

Subsequently, the three top members of the SUC Council, the Executive Team, were pressured by administration to create a new governing body that would oversee issues significant to this new organizational structure, primarily topics of facilities and budget. Control over these issues would thus be taken away from the SUC Council. Some members viewed this alteration in the structure as a threat to their own power and autonomy as an internally student-run organization. Furthermore, some individuals expressed concerns that by conceding to the desires of the administration, the leadership of the organization would shift from one driven by student voice and desire to one of administration whims. Allowing the administration to have control over the workings of the organization would represent a significant departure from the way in which the organization had always functioned – completely student-led. This situation is similar to that described by Katz and Kahn (1978), in that the target of the change was participation and authority.

This change in structure and jurisdiction, a second-order change, precipitated the process of rewriting the constitution. The actual writing responsibility was assumed by the Chief Administrative Officer and the Executive Vice President of Assessment and

Finance. When the CEO, CAO and COO, or Executive Team, presented the issue before the entire council, it was described as an organizational shift that would eliminate the council as it currently existed in favor of a newly minted Board of Directors. This new governing body would include student leaders of various interest groups, including the Student Body President, ROTC Commander, President of the Residence Hall Association, as well as former students and faculty and staff from across campus. These individuals would be granted voting privileges regarding administrative issues that pertained to the Student Union Center and University Center Complex, most notably the planned renovations of the facilities recently placed under the responsibility of the SUC. Members of the current council were assured that the new board of directors would not have any control over the programming elements of SUC committees, unless those programs were meant to reach the campus at large, be an extensive collaboration with other departments or student groups, or potentially cast a negative image upon the SUC or the university.

This change introduced a number of concerns and apprehensions. The three most frequent and intensely felt apprehensions were 1) that the creation of the new board would eliminate collaboration between the two separate branches of the SUC (administration and programming); 2) that the governing body would attempt to micromanage the activities of the SUC without the proper previous knowledge to do so; and 3) that the SUC would lose prestige as a premiere independent organization. Extensive debates regarding these issues took place in meetings as well as in hallways

and other private areas. The measure was ultimately brought to a vote where it was passed, with only a few of the major concerns actually being addressed.

This situation demonstrated a classic second order change within the framework of punctuated equilibrium. The organization experienced a time of rather consistent stability, but was disrupted by the introduction of a radical change in the form of alterations in the organizational structure. This structural change ultimately resulted in a new approach to the process of operations in the organization. Members of the SUC Council were involved in each step of the change process in varying degrees.

### **General Approach**

This project is a study of the Student Union Center and most specifically one significant change the SUC Council underwent during the 2006-2007 academic year. I examined the ways in which members of the SUC Council dealt with this situation, particularly how they communicated feelings of conflict and disdain that were not aired publicly. Considering the specificity of the situation, the interactions leading up to, during and immediately following the change were the only interactions extensively researched.

Given the nature of the topics to be studied and following the pattern provided by Bartunek (1993), Bartunek and Reid (1992), and Morrill (1995), qualitative methods were used for this research. As Lindlof (1995) noted, the ultimate goal of qualitative inquiry is to seek understanding. This method of research aims to understand the “performance and practices of human communication” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 6). Moreover, this methodology emphasizes the importance of allowing understanding to

emerge from the information collected. Therefore the researcher does not enter a study with hypotheses or preconceived expectations of what will occur. Rather, the researcher aims for an in-depth understanding of this situation by allowing the research to develop on its own rather than attempting to control the study. Subsequently, the information garnered from such research cannot be generalized to other situations, but rather, it offers insight that could be transferred to analogous circumstances that might build upon the findings of the initial research.

This study used a triangulation of three methods to generate data and understanding of the development of the change process and reactions to it. Specifically, interviews, artifact data and participant observation were combined to investigate the research questions. Each of the approaches will be discussed in more depth.

The Institutional Review Board approved this study. The Director and Executive Staff of the Student Union Center granted permission to conduct the research and offered assistance. Study participants were contacted via e-mail (Appendix B) and agreed to sign consent forms giving their permission to audiotape the interview. All approval was contingent upon the understanding that research would maintain anonymity of the interviewees. All individuals were given a pseudonym to protect their identities. Any information that precipitated from this research that could have potentially harmed an individual in the organization was used only if necessary and, even in such an instance, all efforts were made to ensure that no harm or embarrassment would come to that individual. All information was kept generic and vague to ensure that the privacy of the participants would be respected. In the presentation made to the executive staff of the

SUC seeking permission to conduct this research, I offered to provide them with the findings of my research and to assist the SUC with options for managing future changes.

*My Role in the SUC*

I have been familiar with and interested in the Student Union Center for some time. My older brother immediately joined an SUC committee upon his entrance to the university in 2000. From this time on, I was interested in the work done by the students as part of the overall organizational entity. When I entered the university in 2003, I immediately sought to become involved in the SUC. My freshman year I was involved in both a committee and a resource area. After this time, I shifted my involvement at the committee level and focused on serving solely in a resource area. My junior year I entered the hierarchy of the SUC Council moving from a general member in my resource area to serving as an Executive Director. The next school year, 2006-2007, I assumed the role of Executive Vice President of my resource area. As such, I was involved in the change being studied. Through this involvement I entered this study with an existing understanding of the change that occurred and the circumstances that surrounded it.

My involvement in the SUC and in the process being studied has been both beneficial and somewhat detrimental. As a result of my participation in this organization, I was familiar with the workings of the organization, which made approaching the study and receiving permission to proceed easier than had I have been an “outsider”. Additionally, I had developed relationships with members of the Council and other SUC members that signaled a level of familiarity and trust that ranged from

general acquaintances to good friends. These relationships made participants willing to speak with me because it seemed like a personal favor as opposed to participation in a research program. Furthermore, these relationships, I feel, also allowed the participants to be open in discussing the change and hidden conflict surrounding it. Because we were acquaintances or friends, there was less hesitation in sharing personal thoughts and describing personal actions than would be expected in a study of such a sensitive issue.

However, my intimate knowledge of the SUC and its members and processes was somewhat detrimental once I began my research. I found myself approaching situations as though I knew why someone acted in a certain way because I thought I knew the person and their opinions on a specific topic. This tendency to make assumptions, however, became apparent to me when, in the process of interviewing, I realized that there were situations and relationships occurring outside my realm of awareness. I subsequently attempted to make sure that I did not make significant decisions or conclusions based on my own thoughts. To minimize this possibility, I spoke with individuals familiar with the situation about my thoughts and conclusions to ascertain if my perceptions were skewed.

My role in the change process in the SUC during 2006-2007 year is technically considered to be that of complete participant (utilizing Gold's (1958) typology) or, a complete-member-researcher (using Adler and Adler's (1998) typology). My actual role, however, is slightly different than the normal understanding of this position. I was acting as a complete participant during the change process; however, at the time, I was not acting a researcher. My role as an official researcher did not begin until the very end

of my year in the Executive Vice President role. While I was interested in the communicative actions of organizational members during the change process and made notes to record the actions that I observed, I made these observations outside of the framework of an academic study and as a general personal interest. Once my role changed to researcher, I was still perceived as a participant by my peers because that was the role in which they knew me. As such, as researcher, I was treated as a peer and not a researcher.

My involvement in the organization as well as my somewhat unorthodox role as a researcher made for an interesting dynamic in the research process. Throughout this process, though, I strived to maintain a distant and neutral stance or give multiple sides' views while researching and analyzing the data.

### **Interviews**

The primary method for responding to the research questions was interviews with those involved in and familiar with the process. Overall, a total of fifteen (15) people were interviewed. Nine (9) were members of the 2006-2007 SUC Council involved in the organizational change process (I was the twelfth member of the group), three (3) were permanent staff advisors who were closely related to the change process and three (3) were members of the SUC in other capacities during the time being studied, but were individuals who witnessed the change process and the discussions that occurred outside the official Council proceedings. All members of the Council were either juniors or seniors and had been involved in the SUC since their freshman year working their way up the organizational hierarchy to their current positions. The staff members have

worked at the SUC for a significant period of time, the average being seventeen (17) years and held the highest staff positions including Director, Associate Director and Assistant Director. The other students interviewed were also deeply involved in the SUC and were good friends with some of the Council members.

Interviews were conducted in a private or semi-private setting, typically in my university office, and utilized the interview guide found in Appendix C. Some of the Council members graduated and moved out of the city prior to the time that interviews were conducted; subsequently, four interviews were conducted over the telephone or e-mail. The interviews ranged in length from twenty minutes to almost two hours.

Interview questions focused on four primary areas: 1) the SUC and the person's position in it, 2) the organizational change that occurred during the 2006-2007 year, 3) perceptions of the organizational change, and 4) personal reactions to the change. Even though none of these questions expressly ask about hidden conflict, or conflict in general, it was determined that directly asking about conflict behaviors, especially hidden conflict, would be counterintuitive since if these behaviors were never expressed overtly, they would most likely not be discussed when asked. Therefore, the first set of questions sought to understand the context in which the change occurred and to expand on my own perspective. The second set of questions focused on how each person understood the change. From this point I aimed to open opportunities for participants to voice ways in which they communicated hidden conflict, when they witnessed it and how they and others reacted to it. Based on each person's response, I was able to direct the close of the interview to ask whether they felt the change was positive or negative



and why. This line of questioning elicited responses that indicated the participants were reflecting on the situation in a new way, which ultimately resulted in ample opportunities for discussion.

The structure of the interview guide allowed for flexibility in the interview process. I deviated from the guide to follow up on comments made by the participants. The interviews carried a tone more like that of a conversation than that of an interview. Interestingly, some of the most interesting information was disclosed after the interview was technically over. Once I had thoroughly covered the topics with the participants, I would ask if they had any questions for me and then we would chat before they left. During this time, the participants would often reveal information that was enlightening and relevant, but information that was not shared during the course of the interview itself. Even though this sharing of information was unintentional, in each situation, I had not yet turned off the audio recorder and was able to record this information for later analysis. This analysis was completed with the transcribing of the interviews. Added to these transcripts were notes taken during the interviews that noted behaviors and expressions that would not appear on the audio recordings.

### **Artifact Data**

Documents related to this process were also gathered and analyzed to add perspective to this research. Meeting minutes, e-mails, memos and other materials produced during this time that included information relating to the SUC and the organizational change were used. To more effectively determine which messages and interactions will be used for this analysis, documents that include information relating to

changes in the constitution, the board of directors or any of the groups to be added to the SUC governing structure will be added to the analysis.

I also gathered records of Council meetings during the 2006-2007 year. Notes and agendas from Administrative Team meetings were also used. E-mails produced by different members of the organization were given to me during two interviews. Some of the e-mails were the official e-mails sent from one member of the committee to others, while the remaining e-mails were private e-mails sent between friends.

Additional documents produced by the organization were used to gain a broader perspective of the organization and the setting of the change. For instance, the websites for the SUC as a whole and each segment within it were referenced. Drafts of the constitution as it was altered were gathered to watch how the change process evolved in writing and to understand the reasons for hidden conflict as they were described by the interview participants. A complete list of the written artifacts analyzed for this project can be found in Appendix D.

### **Participant Observation**

Given the separation of time between my involvement in the organization and the time that I officially began researching, my role as a participant observer was somewhat segmented. During the change process I would make notes, written and mental, of situations that I found to be interesting from the perspective of someone interested in conflict research. However, these notes were not as in-depth or consistent as they would be in the typical field notes of a participant observer. Therefore, my role as a participant

in the process was more than as a source of data in and of itself, but rather it informed my research and enhanced my understanding of information that interviewees provided.

### **Data Analysis**

Since little research exists on the exact topic of this thesis, there are several extensive overviews of hidden conflict which resulted in the development of various taxonomies. As such, the existing typologies were used as a guide or a point of comparison to develop new categories. The categories provided new perspectives to analyze the issues relating to hidden conflict and second-order organizational change. It should be noted that this process was in no way solely linear. Rather, it was iterative in that during the data analysis, should any information be found to inform another research question or another step in the process, I would return to that point. This back and forth method of working continued throughout the analysis process.

Once interviews were completed, they were transcribed for ease and accuracy of analysis. The transcripts, in conjunction with written artifact data and notes from participant observation, were then thoroughly read and analyzed utilizing the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Even though all materials were in written form, they were not necessarily analyzed on a word by word level. Rather, the materials were read for similarities of themes during the process of open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To address Research Question 1, I carefully read the materials looking for any similarities between utterances or written segments as they pertained to a hidden expression of conflict. I would then note those portions and formulate a brief description of the theme that surfaced from them. Once these broad

categories were thoroughly developed, I reviewed them to look for potential links or overlap between the categories. If such relationships were found, those categories were collapsed until each was comprehensive and saturated. As the categories became clear, I compared the descriptions of the themes I had noted to the previously established hidden conflict typologies, such as those that Morrill (1995) identified. In several instances, the themes I had identified matched those of previous studies on hidden conflict. When this occurred, I labeled the approach according to the existing definition. However, when there was a hidden conflict behavior that did not match one previously discussed in the literature, I would assign it a label using a word that matched the definition I had developed to describe the new behavior.

Once I determined the typology of hidden conflict for this study, I addressed Research Question 2 which sought to discover how this organizational change process evolved over time to reveal difference in hidden conflict patterns. I returned to the interview transcripts and other written artifacts looking for the ways in which the change evolved over time, primarily by noting turning points in the change process. These four significant points in time were very evident in the data and therefore easy to identify. At this point, I merged the “change timeline” with the previously developed hidden conflict typologies. To make this step as organized as possible, I created a table whose axes were delineated as hidden conflict typologies and timeline/events (see Appendix E for an example). I then found quotes that exemplified a particular hidden conflict typology at a certain point in time and placed them accordingly within the table. As the table filled,

patterns of hidden conflict used within each stage of the organizational change process became apparent.

As soon as these patterns were identified, I addressed Research Question 3 by ascertaining the roles that types of hidden conflicts played in the organizational change process and how they influenced change development. Utilizing the hidden conflict typology and timeline, I returned to the interview transcripts and written artifacts to look for statements that would indicate if and how a hidden conflict behavior had influenced the change initiative. When such utterances were found, they were noted in a separate document. After I identified all of the examples, I returned to this table and looked for similarities between the statements that were extracted from the data. As these categories began to collapse, patterns of hidden conflict behaviors and their effects on the change process began to emerge.

At this point I began to piece together the ways in which the change process unfolded as it related to hidden conflict behaviors. As the situation became clear, I began to outline the research findings. This information is found in the next chapter.

### **Summary**

This study examined the significant structural change that took place in the Student Union Center during the 2006-2007 academic year. Members of the SUC Council were most involved in deciding to implement and execute the change initiative and therefore were the focus of this research. In addition to interviews with these 11 individuals, I interviewed SUC staff advisors and other students not on the Council. The interviews were triangulated with written artifacts and participant observations to

develop a better understanding of hidden conflict in organizational change. Grounded theory was used to analyze the data and develop categories of hidden conflict behavior. I then looked through the categories and found patterns in behavior and how these patterns changed over time.

The next chapter presents the findings of the data analysis. The first main section of this chapter will describe the atmosphere surrounding the change and the opinions members expressed about the change. This section reveals the attitudes that impacted the development and expression of hidden conflict. The next section describes the hidden conflict behaviors as they were exhibited throughout the change process. The patterns within these strategies are introduced, as well. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the behaviors and patterns fit together throughout the change process.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

The organizational change process that took place during the 2006-2007 academic year proved to be an atmosphere ripe for hidden conflict. The hidden conflict behaviors displayed by members of the SUC Council varied throughout the course of the change process as the organization and its members were faced with new scenarios related to the change. The behaviors identified encompassed some that have been studied in the extant literature, while others have not yet been introduced as reactions to a hidden conflict. All hidden conflict strategies used in this case, even those not previously included in the literature, were identified by multiple organizational members, thereby lending credence to their existence and impact. Subsequently, as the change developed, so did the types and prevalence of hidden conflict behaviors demonstrated by the organizational members. These behaviors seemed to emerge in different phases of the organizational change. Each of these phases was marked by a distinct set of similar emotional undercurrents. As such, these behaviors will be discussed in groups according to the phase in which they occurred for a clearer understanding of their enactment. Before beginning this discussion, the context of the organizational change will be more fully developed.

#### **The Environment of the Change**

The hidden conflict behaviors displayed grew out of the different perceptions the organizational members had of the change process. When asked about perceptions of the change process, most individuals indicated that they thought the process went as

smoothly as could be expected, given the situation. Some organizational members noted elements of the change process that were not handled effectively or situations that led to negative perceptions of the change. These statements focused on a lack of communication about the need for the change, the prevalence of a top-down flow of ideas and the repercussions that the change would have for the organization as well as specifics of the changes to be made to the constitution. Several individuals indicated that they would have preferred to have been notified of the need for this change and been involved in the development of it before being asked to approve the plan developed by the Executive Team. Miranda, a member of the Executive Team, recognized this negative reaction during the interview when she stated, “I think when everybody came back, they kind of knew there were going to be some changes but we didn’t say anything until we kind of had a formative plan and I think people started to freak out because we didn’t let enough information go at the beginning and then we let too much go all at once.”

Furthermore, perceptions of the design and purpose of the SUC led members to believe that the organization should be governed in a “grassroots” format and therefore any significant alterations should be proposed by individuals deeply embedded within it rather than be imposed by external forces or members at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Individuals addressed each of these situations as if a slight alteration of one of these items would have made the change process ideal. That is to say, that these members believed that if the Executive Team had communicated more openly or given more opportunities for involvement, the change process would have been smoother and



more successful. For instance, one individual stated that if the Executive Team had given more information about the necessity of this change, others within the organization would have been more willing to accept the inevitability of the situation and would have been more understanding of the need to move through the process quickly. Other council members indicated that had they been approached with the situation and asked for input, in keeping with the “grassroots” feel, they would have felt a closer link with the change and subsequently would have been more supportive of it and those overseeing it than members who complained about lack of input.

However, upon further questioning, many individuals who felt the change went as well as could be expected actually saw the process as quite flawed. The reasons given for this belief were similar to those individuals who viewed the change as flawed. In describing his perception of the situation, Nathan commented:

I think by creating this and reaching out to other campus entities we were taking control of the situation where we have autonomy over the buildings now, we have control over particular programming however we're reaching out, you know, to put on this façade. I think of, you know, cooperation and unification spearheaded by the leadership in the Student Union Center. And so I think it was this whole, honestly I think it was very calculated presentation of how we were going to present it, what we were going to do, you know and how we were going to implement it. I think there were people that knew what needed to get done and were willing to tell us anything to get it done.

Specifically, the failure of the Executive Team to communicate openly to the Council the full extent of the upcoming change initiative before and during the process was a primary source of anguish. As Owen, a Council member, explained, “I know there were some people who were kind of upset about the way things happened. I think it was mostly, uh, feeling that everything wasn't being communicated to them, um,

fully.” While some members acknowledged that they were not specifically asked for input in the change process, they also felt that it was their responsibility to offer such opinions. Owen felt, “you could have your opinion voiced and have it taken seriously by *someone*, it’s the only way I got things done personally,” while Caleb explained:

I know there was a lot of opportunity for input and we had upper officers saying send us notes or comments about whatever you see that needs to be changed. Then there were a lot of proposals that came down from above for debate, um, different ways to um, incorporate the desired changes. And then eventually we had a few big group meetings in which we went through what had been proposed, what had been written primarily by the CAO, COO and CEO of the SUC for debate by the whole council.

Miranda elaborated on this, describing the Executive Team’s perspective when she stated, “I think there were, I would say in 85% percent of the situations there was always a forum or a way to make your opinion known if you had an opinion to be made...and the other 15% of the time it was like, o.k., we have 12 hours to make this decision so let’s figure it out right now and compromise and somebody leaves unhappy, which happened, or come to some kind of agreement.”

Despite the perceived opportunities to give opinions, members who did not proactively engage in a dialogue with the Executive Team about the change may have felt ignored. However, when describing the reason for these beliefs, Council members felt that the problems in this change process were necessary and natural and therefore unpreventable and subsequently something that members should not regret. Miranda felt, “in hindsight, I don’t know that we would have done it *completely* differently because you can’t really make an effective change without getting too much input. But at the same time I think we could have alerted everybody.” These beliefs were based on

the university administration's pressure to initiate the change in addition to the marked need for expediency as dictated by these same entities. Furthermore, some members felt that the challenges experienced were unavoidable because of the personality differences of those in leadership positions ranging from a rather laissez-faire attitude to those with very assertive modes for working.

The beliefs that the presentation and communication of the change process was poor and ineffectual were felt only by those currently serving on Council during the 2006-2007 year and, even then, it was not as great a concern for all individuals in such positions. When speaking with those individuals who did not serve on the Executive Council during the 2006-2007 year, they did not seem to have a strong opinion positively or negatively in regards to the way in which the change was handled including its inception, presentation and communication throughout the process. Whitney, a committee chair, said it was, "not posed as a huge change" to those outside of the Council and furthermore, there was "not enough information for them to 'buck the system.'"

Alternatively, non-Council members of the SUC stated that they were generally unaware of the organizational change to the extent that it was discussed within the confines of Council meetings. Most people tended to overhear discussions in the hallway about an impending change, but did not inquire further. At one point during the change process, members of the Executive Team gave a PowerPoint presentation during a meeting of all Council and committee chairs to alert more organizational members of the change, but this was done as more of a perfunctory obligation and one in which non-

Council members seemed almost disinterested. This level of awareness satisfied them because they were preoccupied with the responsibilities of their own positions. Those interviewed stated that they were pleased to not be inundated with information about this change, especially since the outcome would have no effect on their committees' futures. Subsequently, they did not seek an active role in the change process either by giving input, or by seeking extensive information. Additionally, some members of the Council indicated that while there may have been mistakes in the change process, they were not significant enough to cause them to have a negative experience or view the overall situation negatively. Only two individuals expressed these particular feelings during the interview process. Others members, however, tried to see the situation in a positive light by calling it a learning experience and something to which they can refer back to when they enter a "real world" office situation.

### *Timeline*

Before examining the hidden conflict strategies in this organizational change, this section reviews the phases of change that frame this process. The change process was divided into four distinct chronological stages. The first phase, what has been labeled "the beginning" or "prior to the change", occurred at the start of the 2006-2007 academic year as Council members were beginning their positions. At this time the Executive Team began to develop a plan for the organizational change that would abolish Council in its present form and create a Board of Directors composed of student and staff leaders across campus. They planned to present this plan to Council at an official meeting early in the school year. Subsequently, Council members began to hear rumblings that an

organizational change was imminent. The next phase, when the change was introduced, began within the first four weeks of the academic year, and began when the Executive Team officially introduced the plans for the change. It continued for approximately two and a half months. At this time, problems with the change initiative began to surface as the plan was not automatically approved by the Council, and as the Executive Team faced additional expectations for and restrictions on the initiative from university entities external to the SUC. In the middle of the spring semester, the “ending” of the change process, the Executive Team and Council began to address the problems with the change process and the change was ultimately finalized. At this time, Council members selected the replacements for their Council positions for the next academic year while the Executive Team sought to continue governance of the organization beyond the organizational change which had absorbed a great deal of focus during the Fall semester. These four stages are illustrated in Figure 4.1 below.

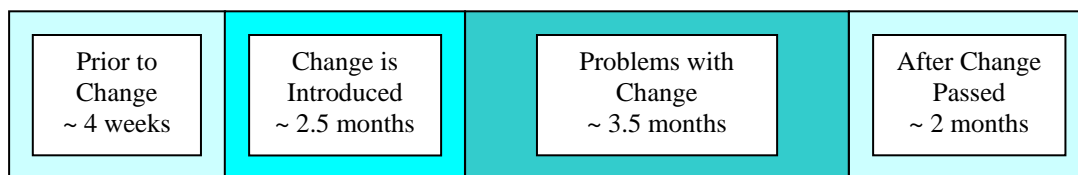


Figure 4.1: The Four Stages of the SUC Change

### **Hidden Conflict as the Sharing of Information and Opinions**

As previously discussed, this variety of perceptions of the change process resulted in a number of behaviors that expressed hidden conflict throughout the actual

change. Two of the most common behaviors were gossip and bitching. Gossip behaviors, as the interviewees noted, matched the ones described in the hidden conflict literature. As Miranda, concerned about the presence of this behavior stated, “This is really bad. It makes it look like all we do is talk about people when they’re not around.” For this study, gossip is defined as talking about a situation, or another person, in secret or sharing speculative information. Like gossip, individuals expressed their displeasure by complaining. Jones (1990) in Sotirin and Gottfried (1999) identified such complaints about a situation or an individual in private or semi-private settings as bitching. Bitching is a way to “[retell] an event or [make] observations about people and conditions that highlight personal affronts, injustices, and violations” with “a tone of moral indignation” (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999, p. 58). The primary difference between gossip and bitching is that while gossip tends to focus on the transgressions of others, bitching focuses on a personal offense perpetrated against the complaining individual (Morrill & Thomas, 1992; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). For this study, bitching will be considered complaining or making snide remarks privately or intentionally out of earshot of those in a higher position while gossip will be talking about another person in private, but not necessarily complaining.

Throughout the change process, gossip and bitching were used primarily as a way to gain and share information. Initially, gossip was a way to garner information about the impending change. Prior to the official meeting during which the change initiative was introduced, word began to spread that a significant organizational change was being developed. These rumors led some members to speculate and seek further

information through the use of gossip. This gossip was identifiable as such because this communication did not take place in the open forums of official meetings or electronic communication; rather it was done in private conversation. Nathan, a Council member, explained, "I heard about it through other channels and you know just in the privacy of people's office and you know in confidence and just kind of listening about what the whole reasoning was for everything I like honestly didn't agree with it." However, the director, Art, noted that "[expressions of discontent were] brought on in meetings and then you heard the rumblings going on behind it." Those interested in learning more about the plans being developed behind closed doors took one of two courses of action. Some individuals directly approached those members intimately involved in the planning process. Alternatively, some members met with other individuals not linked to the planning to share what information they had and speculate about what they did not know, thus engaging in behaviors that exemplify gossip. As Caleb, a Council member, described:

Most of the discussion took place outside of the meetings just because talking with individual people, talking with individual staff. However, in terms of meetings that accomplished things that pushed things forward and made decisions, those were generally debated in the groups during our meetings...Usually it would be me asking the C-level officers sort of what was going on behind the scenes, kind of where things stood. There was a lot of, my understanding was, that there was a lot of other politics going on behind the scenes, so I was just kind of interested on keeping tabs on everything that was going on just within the SUC student structure so when I was talking about it, sometimes it was simply tossing out an idea, sometimes it was hearing what C-level officers were thinking before they actually presented it to a group as a whole, other times it was sort of just keeping up with the movement as a whole so to speak...My input outside the group discussions had some weight, but visibly and officially my role was to provide input upfront and then vote on decisions.

Even if some individuals had sought information in public forums, Executive Team members and others involved in the change would not have given more insight into the situation thus increasing the need for persons to find information outside of formal communication channels. As Miranda, a member of the Executive Team explained, they attempted to "...at least giving the appearance of, 'We're thinking about doing this, bring us your concerns; we're not going to tell you what's going on, [but] you can come and try to get it out of us.'" This attitude led to frustration among those seeking a greater understanding of the impending change which fueled the fire and desire to learn more. The need to know more about the situation led to more gossip and ultimately to the introduction of bitching after the official announcement of the change plans was made.

Whereas prior to the change, gossip was used to gain an understanding of what was happening, its purpose shifted to be a forum through which individuals could find others who shared their thoughts and opinions of the change process. Once the Executive Team officially announced their plans for the organizational change at the Council meeting early in the year, the need for Council members to seek speculative information about the situation was no longer necessary. Instead, some Council members felt as though they were being excluded from an important organizational process because they were not asked for an opinion on the situation since the Executive Team had already made the decisions regarding the change. These feelings of exclusion from the decision making system caused some individuals to attempt to find others who shared their viewpoints, not necessarily to band together for a common cause, but rather



to simply ascertain that there were others who viewed the situation similarly to them.

This was achieved communicatively through gossip and bitching. While it is difficult to say exactly what the gossip was specifically focused upon, those interviewed indicated that it was through private conversations that they learned of others' opinions about the impending change and the way in which it was handled by the Executive Council.

Rhonda, a staff advisor, was hesitant to fully acknowledge that individuals were complaining about the process outside of meetings but did say, "that doesn't mean that a couple of people who agree with each other aren't in another room having a conversation about how wrong the other guy is – that I'm sure happened." Some individuals expressed frustration that it was only in this context that others would make their true feelings known, rather than in meetings or other official communications.

Nathan said:

That's what really kind of perturbed me because there were people you know that had concerns outside of the meetings but when we got to the meetings would not say anything and so that's what I'm talking about the silent majority and so that was so frustrating because it's like, well, it's not like my concern but it's someone else's concern...like I know of at least two people on council that would talk to me outside and would voice these concerns but when it came to the meeting it would just be like o.k. let's go. Just because they didn't want to cause conflict or because they didn't want, they wanted to save face if you will, like in terms of what people thought about them.

Even though gossip occurred in private settings, others became aware of its existence. This increased awareness, however, did not necessarily indicate an increase in frequency or severity. Bitching was introduced at this juncture as another way for individuals to share their positions while learning about others' positions. Similar to gossip, bitching occurred outside the context of meetings, but rather in hallways, offices

and other private settings where anger could be vetted privately. Caleb explained, “I think some people took their frustration out on the, those that were requiring the changes above the SUC level and sort of more snide comments and that sort of remark, but they knew they needed to get their business done and work on it and do a good job but at the same time they weren’t happy that the process was having to happen at all.” Through complaining about the way in which the change process had been handled and the insult of not being included in the planning some Council members found others who concurred with their position. Paige exemplified this when she stated, “somebody might know that I [disagreed with what was happening] and come talk to me and say ‘I totally agree with you. This is crap.’”

Once Council members found others with their same stance on the need for greater communication and participation in the change process, the way members used and enacted gossip and bitching changed. After the Executive Team introduced the organizational change to the Council, problems with the process began to arise as members questioned the efficacy and feasibility of Executive Team plans. Executive Team felt pressure to act because of these concerns and the shock expressed by Council members that they had not been approached to assist in the organizational change earlier. Responding to this pressure, they began to include the rest of Council in the discussion of how the change process should be conducted. This adjustment in position of the Executive Team in conjunction with the difficulties encountered when trying to enact the prepared change plan led disenfranchised members to express their discontent and malaise for the situation. As had previously occurred in the change process, this sense of

bitterness was expressed partially through the use of gossip and bitching. In this instance, however, the frequency with which members used these behaviors increased in private (out of meeting) settings, particularly since bonds were developed when the specifics of the change were first introduced as a result of gossip and bitching. Miranda alluded to such situations by explaining:

I would say I tried to be really good about not taking politics out of the office. But, at the same time, you end up being friends, even with personality differences; you end up being friends with the people that you work with. It's difficult when multiple members of your team are frustrated with another member of your team and they come to you to complain about it and you're like great, get in line I'm just as frustrated about it as you are. And so at times I think we did have you know, probably spurred the problem on by, you know if someone came to talk to me about something and we ended up talking about what so and so said in the meeting yesterday and their comment or whatever and it's difficult really not to do that because there really is no other outlet than the people that you're working with.

With its increased pervasiveness, others reacted to the gossip in an ambivalent way since the behaviors had become commonplace and typically had a sardonic attitude. However, some members of the Council found the bitching expressions bothersome because of the general attitude it espoused – one of passively complaining about the situation rather than working proactively to improve it – and demonstrated it by obviously ignoring the behavior or making nonverbal statements of disapproval, such as rolling ones eyes. The Council members' ambivalence regarding gossip and their disapproval of bitching was not obvious at the time but it became clear in their interviews.

Eventually, after it became clear to the disenfranchised members that the Executive Team was not going to address feelings of bitterness among Council

members, the attitude behind their disapproval took on an air of apathy. Gossip continued to be a significant method through which to surreptitiously express conflict. However, by this phase in the change process, those who had already engaged in gossip would continue to do so, while those who had not yet gossiped would not begin. As such, this behavior was eventually all but ignored.

At this juncture, the behavioral patterns of gossip and bitching divide. As the change process concluded, bitching became more frequent, though the issues addressed in this communicative act were no longer restricted to the change process, but instead seeped into other areas of the organizations operations with frequent references to the change process. As Miranda explained, “everybody talks and especially in a tight knit organization like this, I mean definitely things I know from third parties or fourth parties regarding various comments or people who were selected for stuff or not selected for stuff or were nominated for awards or were not nominated for awards or a lot of politicking that went on based on the fact” that they had a different perspective on the situation. Moreover, not only did the bitching continue, but the audience to whom these complaints were launched began to include the current organizational members who were selected for the Council for the next academic year. Nathan described the scenario by saying:

Well, I think it was just a top-down, I think it was just a top-down dissent. I mean three EVPs I know, I mean I told my EDs about my frustration...and then it just kind of trickles down and then there was a lot of frustration with the chairs, in terms of there not being enough support from the EVPs and I mean that gets trickled down to their exec team, I mean it just kind of permeates, I think.

He went on to explain that he told his successor to “keep focused on your position and don’t bring your frustration back to your team so that they get bogged down in it and disillusioned.” Glen, a Council member still involved in the SUC, acknowledged this behavior as well, noting:

People still on leadership today still remember what happened last year and none of them are in the same position so I don’t know if they remember all of the rebellion that happened, so it became one of the main things that our team has been able to focus on...I think it was made known by those rebellion groups and when they transitioned their officers that was definitely one of things they covered was don’t let this happen or this happened this year, don’t make this happen next year.

Gossip and bitching played a significant role in the change process as it developed in phases. Though often considered mundane, gossip and bitching provided a great deal of insight into the perceptions, opinions and feelings about the change.

Nathan illustrated this scenario when he stated, “I mean I felt like I was out of the loop too and I felt like I got into the loop through other people like through other channels, like other people who were on council that knew and would say stuff, I mean cause we were pretty close like that but I don’t know, I just feel like it was so warped because I feel like people had their own agendas so then people who were already on council were going for the plan because they had their own agendas.” These hidden conflict strategies served not only as communicative forms throughout the process but also as templates through which patterns of other hidden conflict behaviors became apparent.

### **Hidden Conflict as a Means of Connection**

The pattern of behaviors exemplified in gossip and bitching are analogous to the other hidden conflict behaviors that members enacted, particularly the act of locating

others who shared similar opinions of the process. Through the use of gossip and bitching, Council members were able to enact another form of hidden conflict – coalition building. Coalition building is defined as actions in which two or more individuals with similar opinions secretly join together for a purpose, most often to combat a predominant organizational stance (Kolb & Putnam, 1991). These behaviors occurred when the change was first officially presented as Council members dealt with the confusion of the situation and formulated their own opinions about the way in which the change was presented. These individual opinions were strongly influenced by the perceptions of the situation as previously discussed. Groups formed as individuals tended to gravitate towards those with similar opinions. Therefore, those members who felt that there was not enough communication and that more people should have been involved in the development change plan found other individuals who felt the situation was not approached properly. Likewise, the Council members who felt the situation was handled as effectively as could have been anticipated joined with individuals who shared this opinion. Art, the SUC Director noticed this behavior and explained, “I guess I saw what I’d call factions getting together.” As a result, fissures within Council began to emerge, despite some members’ hesitancy to admit it, like Paige who explained, “it could have been cliquish, it wasn’t cliquish, but it could have been caused, people had their, they didn’t have their sides, but almost.” These divisions resulted in the development of distinct groups based on Council members’ positions on the issue. Nathan explained:

Me and two other people on council were really good friends even before we got in these positions so it was just in the privacy of our house or just really being like, I’m worried about, you know, such and such issue, you know, I don’t think this is going to be good because I mean just realizing and being up front a

complete disclosure of the concerns was kind of how I knew, I mean we were very candid. I wasn't having to pry it out of people.

Determining who belonged to each of these groups became obvious through analyzing a variety of nonverbal behaviors. For instance, those whose opinions aligned sat in clusters at meetings and could be seen talking among themselves in hallways and offices. The predominant organizational stance was that the change was inevitable and must be executed as soon as possible. Incidentally, this view was espoused and advanced by the Executive Team. Owen told of how this group of individuals sought confederates saying:

If something didn't go my way, [the president] was great about coming to me and talking about why, well asking me why I felt the way I did and telling me why they felt the way they did. Maybe that didn't have any effect on the change itself, um, but having the opportunity to voice my opinion to one of the leaders was definitely a positive thing...He wanted to make sure that I was kind of on board with what was going on, so I wasn't sort of alienated from the rest of the group, um, so he would further explain why they made certain decisions and at times we still disagreed about that, but you can't have everyone agree with you all the time so I thought that was a good way of going about that.

Art verified this approach to coalition building when he stated that he and the Council president, "tried to talk to some of the key opinion leaders [staff and students] to try to let them know that nothing would be harmed and, if anything, it would be giving us more authority and responsibility." Members of groups that were counter to this dominating ideology were considered "rebels" by those of the predominant group. These rebels simply believed that more communication and grassroots initiatives were needed in the change process. As Glen described, "forming of a clique...was definitely like a coup happening in the meeting and you'd be like 'Oh gosh where is this coming from?' And it really stemmed from the initial changes that happened in the first three

months of the first semester.” He described how these rebel factions reinforced themselves, “yeah, on like every single issue. And it was definitely counter productive. Like, if they’d just broken down and gotten past that or even if they’d been talked to by the leadership on a one-on-one basis, I don’t know if that happened, but if it did, it didn’t really work.” There was a small number of individuals who did not expressly choose a group to join, but through further discussion in meetings, the positions of others became clear. In keeping with hidden or covert conflict, the discussions at meetings never led to people sharing their beliefs, but statements made in these meetings indicated what Council members thought of the change process.

This subtle use of conversation to indicate one’s negative opinion of the change process took the form of asking the same questions over and over as a way to express dissatisfaction in the answers received. This hidden conflict behavior was labeled questioning. As with coalition building, members used this behavior primarily during the initial phases of the change process, when the change was first introduced. Some Council members were offended that the Executive Team did not explicitly ask for their opinion of the planned change and subsequently tried to give their opinion during meetings without stating it outright. Though this behavior has not been studied in the extant literature, it appears as though individuals utilized this strategy to assert themselves and to indicate their disagreement with the Executive Team’s choice of not seeking the opinions of Council as a whole. The perceived benefit of this behavior was that individuals could express their feelings without expressly stating this disapproval



and thereby avoid the risk of being involved in an open and hostile conflictual confrontation.

These behaviors were the only types of hidden conflict displayed during the confines of official meetings in discussions of the change process. During meetings, Council members expressed displeasure, but not necessarily through overt statements of disapproval. While there were rare occasions during a meeting that someone voiced being disgruntled with the change, they were rather significant anomalies. Some of those interviewed remembered certain meetings when tension was high, but that was mostly because of a severe tone of voice or rapid verbal exchanges, but there was no recollection of outright arguments. Rather, individuals used questioning, or asking the same questions related to the change process and plan proposed by the Executive Team continually, regardless of if they were answered, to express disapproval. Glen described such situations as, “not really hostile, I guess direct questioning. I guess [others] understood the process a lot more than I did and I guess they felt like they should be involved a little more than they were, the officers.” Members repeatedly asked questions that focused on the impetus and reasoning for the change, the time constraints propelling the change process forward, the motivation for creating the new Board of Directors in lieu of Council instead of in addition to the existing Council structure, and the impact of the new structure on existing organizational functions. Rhonda explained:

Most people would raise a question and the most interesting thing is when those questions, in our environment, if the question comes up two or three times but in different ways, it means that the group is not buying it and that tended to be what would happen is, the question’s raised, seemingly answered, but the next person has their hand up and is asking that very same question but in a different way and

I think that was the most common way in which it was handled. And at times, it was probably a heated exchange.

Glen also noted that, “Towards the officer team, it just seemed like sometimes they’d just start questioning a lot more things you wouldn’t normally question because they felt like they weren’t involved in any way. I perceived it as defiance and it was maybe even like a lack of confidence in the officer team in some respect.” Paige described these questions as being a way of expressing discontent, as she noted, “...in complaining, but I think more in questioning or general wonderings...and so people were asking why and really questions that nobody could answer” about the change and what was happening with it. Several of these questions could be considered unmanageable questions because of the difficulty in adequately responding to them. Unmanageable questions “cause difficulty, give information,...bring the discussion to a false conclusion...and may produce defensiveness and anger in the other party...[which may] make the other party feel uncomfortable and less willing to provide information in the future” (Lewicki, Saunders, Barry, & Minton, 2004, p. 136). For instance, some members used loaded questions or those that “put the other party on the spot regardless of the answer” (Lewicki, et al., 2004, p. 137). Other questions were heated or ones that are “high emotionality [or] trigger emotional responses” (Lewicki et al., 2004, p. 137). Members of the “rebel” factions perpetrated these actions. Those leading the change effort perceived these behaviors as a nuisance and an example of inattentiveness. Typically, questions would be answered, even though Council members who responded expressed their annoyance through a disapproving tone of voice and answering the

question quickly and impatiently. As Nathan explained many, especially members of splinter groups felt:

...reactions of disbelief, questions of, or misunderstandings of why it's happening now and why there was a sudden push for things to go quickly and you know, not being as thought out and why whenever we'd ask questions people would get kind of, you know, on end or kind of just respond with curt answers or with, in a caustic way. It's just like, what's going on? Why, why, why can't we just be amiable about answering our questions directly and allowing us to get to know exactly what's going on?

Questioning then further polarized the group by making the divisions clear and by giving Council members the opportunity to express their disapproval in a subtle manner, while indicating which coalition they identified with most based upon their participation and reaction to the consistent inquiries. Nathan noted this situation:

...with the vast majority of people kind of already having their mind set kind of predetermined already, it was very easy for multiple people to kind of refute my concerns. I know that other people had concerns but... it was presented at council after I'd heard about it through other channels and so just after hearing about and after raising my concerns I was easily refuted (laugh) and other people who raise concerns were refuted, as well.

From this point forward, individuals used hidden conflict behaviors according to the faction they had joined during coalition building. Even though coalition formation occurred early in the change process, the bonds formed during this time grew stronger as setbacks in the change process began to emerge.

### **Hidden Conflict as Anger and Bitterness**

The divisions between these differing factions grew stronger as the hidden conflict behaviors indicated an undercurrent of anger and bitterness that fueled the interactions. One of the ways that opposing factions expressed these feelings of anger and bitterness was through wry, sardonic humor that focused on the negative qualities

and actions of those who supported the change. This form of hidden conflict first appeared as problems arose in the change process. Specifically, these problems resulted from Council members realizing that the plan originated by the Executive Team was unfeasible. This infeasibility was caused by the Council's refusal to approve the changes the Executive Team presented and the addition of new expectations and restrictions by university officials. Humor was not only used by Council members when problems with the change first emerged. Individuals continued to use it as Council resolved these problems and finally passed and implemented the change. Humor was introduced as a way to release frustration while also expressing disapproval. Both Nathan and Miranda alluded to discussions that they themselves had or heard other members comment, lightheartedly, "Oh, I need a drink!" Owen remembers other Council members joking, "Gee I can't wait to get out of it (laughing), get done with the SUC."

Humor became a means through which individuals could release frustration with the change process as well as express their disdain for other persons and the process in general. It consisted of jokes about situations or another person, or a form of delight in the absurdity of the plan's failure of a person's actions. Glen alluded to this form of hidden conflict when he said, "Yeah (chuckle) all the time, especially in the second semester it seemed like that was the common theme. I mean, it'd be jokes being made about lack of e-mails or lack of communication." Most of these jokes and remarks tended to focus on one individual – the president – even though his role in the organization was to serve more as a liaison with external constituents. Glen confirmed

this assumption when he explained, “I feel like the president definitely became the butt of the jokes quite often. It’s not saying he didn’t do a great job in making change; he made the first step but it’s just the way he went about it people did not respect.” When not being used to quip about individuals, jokes poked fun at the outcomes of the change initiative. It was almost as if the individuals making these jokes were expressing the belief that the Executive Team had received their just desserts for making decisions on their own behind closed doors. Steve, an advisor noticed this behavior and described it as:

They’d joke about ‘you know I had some questions that I thought were valid but they were brushed off and now isn’t it funny that exactly what we pointed out is exactly what’s holding up the process’ ...I think there were people who, and I know this isn’t totally mature, but were like ‘I told you so’, that’s what, and when I say it was kind of a joke, it became ‘well, we warned ‘em.’

These statements were not necessarily made in malice, but rather as a “safe” way to express negative feelings without being perceived as a whiner or a member of an alienated group. Members of opposition groups within Council first used this form of hidden conflict when they spoke with their allies in private conversations. These individuals continued to use humor as a source of hidden conflict through the process. However, in time, this use of humor began to spread to other organizational members outside of Council to show inclusion in the organization. As the year drew to a close, the fact that there were jokes about the process almost became a joke in and of itself; one in which many organizational members relished, not because of its expression of disapproval but for its absurdity. As Glen noted, “I think originally it was anger but then it became a joke. It reached the point where, I mean, they couldn’t do anything about it,

so they might as well joke about it.” In this instance, individuals outside of the conflicts adopted the hidden conflict behavior, thus making this behavior a unique reaction to the change process.

Most of the hidden conflict behaviors remained confined within the borders of the alliances formed early in the change process. These behaviors began to result in alienation of both groups and individuals by these factions as a subtle expression of anger and bitterness over the change process and the conflict secretly brewing between these sets of individuals. As the awareness of the developing coalitions increased, compounded by problems with the change process, disagreements between these different sects began to arise. To address these differences, some members intentionally alienated others from group discussions as a way to express their disdain for them or their opinions secretly. Caleb described the situation as, “...acrimony both between the lower and upper levels, then between the top three that seemed to seep out a little bit.”

At the initiation of the change program, two primary coalitions of individuals formed – those strongly pushing the change and those upset by the way the change process had been approached and presented. Alienation then became a type of hidden conflict behavior as these two groups began to alienate each other by leaving members of other factions out of professional and personal discussions and activities. These alienations occurred on both group and individual levels and both in public and private settings. Groups with similar opinions about the change process, as well as individual members of these groups, would intentionally alienate other groups or members of other groups from discussions, activities and communications. As the change process

eventually drew to a close, the individuals who were alienated by different groups in the midst of the change process continued to be alienated by these same groups because of their previous affiliations. This illustrates the force of the coalitions formed early in the process in that the alliances made as a result of the change remained strong even though the initial reason for these groupings was no longer relevant. However, this behavior shifted in meaning from being a situation imposed on an individual, to one that an individual selected to separate him or herself from either the majority or the rebel faction. Owen described his position as, “I was probably a little less involved than some other folks were too, or at least less emotionally involved (laughing). I did my own thing and was concerned during meetings and would pay attention to what was going on but did not get involved in the “petty politics.”

The sharp divisions among Council members that resulted in alienation are inextricably linked to the differing opinions adopted by the distinct groups formed during coalition building at the beginning of the change process. At this juncture it should be noted that the divisions between groups was partly inspired by divisions among members of the Executive Team. Two of those interviewed referred to the group as a “dysfunctional triumvirate.” Two of the three members of the Executive Team joined with several other members to emerge as the dominating majority that supported that change process. The remaining member of the Executive Team joined with other Council members to protest the way that the change was handled and to become the rebel faction. The alienation that resulted from the way in which coalitions formed undoubtedly led to interesting group dynamics both in public meetings and in private

interactions. This alienation was enacted through actions as simple as seating arrangements at meetings to behaviors as extreme as not including individuals with differing opinions in important communication or decision making meetings. As Rhonda acknowledged:

there were certainly times for [the dissenting member of the Executive Team] that she only knew what was shared in a meeting but not necessarily what was happening with the direct phone calls or the “let me go grab this person on the way and we can go have coffee and talk about how we’re going to develop this strategy and how we’re going to sell this to someone else.” Some of those external manifestations of how to get the job done, I don’t think that person was ever called upon to be engaged. And in some ways actually usurped the actual existing constitution, but the constitution places the COO as second in command and because of that existing relationship that person was pushed to third.

Rhonda went on to say, “The knowledge of the friction between those three was too known, too known, maybe from things they said, but probably it was from the way they engaged with each other.” Paige described this general situation and meetings with the dissenting member of the Executive Team when she said:

Everybody knew there was strain in the upper three members, *everybody* knew that...from conversations with people’s advisors and from conversations with those people and then even in meetings when it was [council members] and the [Executive Team member] you know we would ask questions of the [Executive Team member] and it was hard for her not to say ‘I agree with you, but this is coming from the president’ or ‘I agree with you and I brought that up, but I wasn’t listened to’ and so they tried to make it seem like they didn’t completely disagree, but it was hard not to when the topic came up I guess.

In more private contexts, alienation was performed as exclusion from social events such as parties, “hanging out” at different organizational members’ homes, and conversations about each others’ personal lives. Though it would be understandable for individuals to be upset by such forms of exclusion, no one appeared to feel jaded by these behaviors. This is mostly likely because exclusion from the activities of one group



typically meant that an individual was instead involved in the activities of another group. Alienation carries a connotation of exclusion which can lead to feelings of superiority of one's group and animosity for another which were displayed in other hidden conflict behaviors.

This almost competitive attitude led some Council members to fervently seek out the failures of others in order to bolster one's own organizational stance through a hidden conflict strategy known as surveillance. Morrill (1995) defined surveillance as "the systematic gathering of information by aggrieved parties about those against whom they have grievances" (p. 162). This definition does imply negative emotions behind surveillance, but fails to express a reason for this behavior; therefore, for this study, surveillance was defined as watching how others acted and subsequently waiting for them or their proposed course of action to fail. Surveillance was the only hidden conflict strategy marked by an undercurrent of anger that occurred solely when problems began to arise during the change process and did not carry over to the conclusion of the change. Interestingly, when surveillance is discussed in the extant literature, there is no mention of an underlying bitterness that motivates the behavior.

The surveillance behaviors exhibited during the change process focused on two primary instances that involved the "dominant majority" or those individuals who wanted the change process completed as quickly as possible and in accordance with the Executive Team's standards. The first instance in which surveillance occurred came when those supporting the change, led by the CEO and CAO, attempted to inform organizational members outside of Council of the planned changes. This information

was shared at a meeting attended by Council members, committee chairs and other interested parties through a PowerPoint presentation prepared by the Executive Team that explained the planned changes. Those opposed to the change noticed the proof reading errors in the presentation slides as a symbolic attack on the group's failure to share information accurately and appropriately. While those opposed to the change found this to be an egregious error, those in attendance who were not on the Council did not find it to be significant and made no mention of it. This action exemplified surveillance because the members of the coalition against the change vigilantly watched those making the presentation and exposed a mistake as proof that their opposition position was superior.

The second occasion of surveillance occurred near the conclusion of the change development when the supporters of the Board of Directors plan contacted the external campus representatives to gain their support for creating this new governing body. When the Board of Directors structure was first introduced, those opposed to the change used the previously discussed hidden conflict strategy of questioning to inquire about the practicality and feasibility of asking other campus student leaders to join the new governing body. The members advancing the change dismissed these concerns because they were certain that participation would not be a problem and they would address the issue more fully at a later point in time. When the time came to ask the external members for their participation on the Board of Directors, many of the individuals approached agreed to participate if only the expectations for their involvement were different, while some individuals declined to participate all together. This outcome led

those opposed to the change from the beginning, who had carefully observed the process, to record and celebrate the failure of the plan because it justified their opposition to and challenging of the organizational change. Again, surveillance is exemplified in this instance. Members of the group against the change were certain that the plan supporters of the change had developed would not work. Therefore, they carefully followed the implementation of this plan and, when the plan began to fail, felt satisfied that their objections were proven correct, thereby proving in their minds that they were right while the others were wrong. Surveillance in this instance was a prime example of a passive form of hidden conflict in that it was only exposed after speaking to individuals who participated in such behaviors, even though other forms of hidden conflict, driven by anger and resentment were not as inconspicuous.

The final type of hidden conflict marked by an undercurrent of bitterness was avoidance, or, staying away from a specific individual as a result of a feud. The situation that led to this expression of hidden conflict occurred when the change process was slowed by problems and continues to the present time. This hidden conflict strategy was the only one that Council members used to communicate grievances between students and staff. Whereas other hidden conflict strategies were most likely used by students, without staff joining in, students used this strategy with staff and vice versa. The situation that precipitated the display of avoidance as hidden conflict was one that led to feelings of animosity or betrayal between the involved individuals. When problems with the change process began to arise, two members of Council who favored the change began to have difficulty communicating with and understanding another

member of Council who did not support the change as it was being advanced. The two individuals favoring the change sought out the third individual's staff advisor without telling this third party and asked for guidance in how to approach the person. This situation resulted in a significant stimulation for conflict. During this meeting the two individuals were advised to speak with the third party to work out differences. When this meeting took place, the students discovered that the advisor had shared their complaints with the third party, even though all discussions were supposed to be private. The two parties who approached the advisor felt an immense sense of betrayal, as did the advisor, which resulted in avoiding each other through the remainder of the students' tenures in the organization.

The use of avoidance as a hidden conflict strategy in this instance differs from the way it has previously been studied. While the feelings of anger and betrayal were communicated covertly through the use of avoidance, the impetus for this hidden conflict behavior is slightly different than previous understandings of this strategy. Typically, avoidance as a hidden conflict strategy has been used by an individual to cope with a grievance against someone else that he or she does not want to express. This causes the person who committed the original grievance to be unaware of the feelings of the aggrieved party (Morrill, 1989 & 1995). In this situation, however, avoidance was a reaction to a conflictual situation and was realized by all involved parties, instead of as a secretive way to prevent acknowledging the existence of a conflict.

The act of avoiding particular people occurred in all contexts of the organization, not just meetings, but also in daily interactions. The advisor involved stopped attending

meetings led by one of the aggrieved parties when it was not necessary to attend and, when it was necessary, the two would not address each other unless obligated. Outside of the official organizational contexts, the involved parties would attempt to avoid all contact, even the exchange of superficial niceties. As Miranda explained:

Man, I don't think I made eye contact with [the staff advisor] for about three weeks...[and she] wouldn't make eye contact with me either. For a couple of weeks we'd pass each other in the hall and be like, 'Yeah, good morning. It was a good morning til I saw you' (laugh). So, I mean we'd gone from talking and having an easy relationship to like, when you pass somebody you can tell there's a strain there on both sides, I mean just by body language.

The avoidance behavior in this situation indicated a lack of willingness to address a conflictual issue. Instead, the individuals involved chose to move forward passively while continuing to carry the same feelings of discontent.

### **Hidden Conflict as a Form of Disconnect**

The strain of the change process, coupled with the perceived lack of receptivity by each organizational faction, led some individuals to exhibit a disconnect from and lack of interest in the organization. Withdrawal is the first of these behaviors and it emerged when problems with the change process were not adequately acknowledged. During interviews, some Council members opposed to the change process clearly expressed frustration that their opinions had not been respected by those advancing the organizational change. Consequently, they felt that there was no reason to express opinions or proactively seek involvement in the actions of Council later in the change process because they would not be respected at that point either. These feelings of unimportance caused these organizational members to alter their behaviors to display their disapproval of the poor treatment they had endured. This feeling emerged as a

withdrawal from the organization or as leaving a situation or interaction with others, physically, vocally or emotionally almost as if sulking because of a transgression committed against them personally. In essence, this behavior was a form of punishment for those who had quashed involvement in Council discussions related to the organizational change.

Withdrawal, as it was enacted in this situation, differs from previous understandings of this behavior. Therefore, this construct is operationalized only by the information gathered during the research for this thesis project. In most instances withdrawal was enacted through not speaking up in meetings, abstaining from a vote important to the organizational change initiative or even reducing the amount of time an individual physically spent in the SUC. These behaviors were especially poignant when they were enacted by individuals who had been very vocal and involved prior to the change process. Miranda recalled when this behavior began to be expressed:

...a lot of times when you start to talk about an issue you can always see the people sitting at the end of the table making comments to the person sitting next to them as I'm laying out what the decision making process has been. And that's fine, I never asked for complete and total silence or anything like that (chuckle) but you can recognize that whenever there's someone making a comment that they don't want to make loud enough for everybody to hear there's some kind of underlying issue there and so I started to see more and more of that with a couple of people, um, and tried to address that with them on a personal level, especially as it tended to get worse and worse.

She believed this behavior was the result of "just the general attitude, just the general 'Tsk, uh, well I'm still angry that you didn't ask for my opinion up front, so I'm not going to give it to you even when you ask for it and I'm just going to continue to be malcontented with the decision that's made.'" While the withdrawal was evident, it was

rarely addressed because it was viewed as immature behavior by those who did not espouse their same views of the change process. On one occasion, withdrawal was noted quite publicly. During a final approval vote for the change process, two members of rebel faction opposed to the change abstained from the vote. A member of the Executive Team reacted by yelling “Come on you guys” and slamming her hand on the table. The result of this instance was an increase in tension at the meeting and further withdrawal by the abstaining Council members. Withdrawal was the first step that some members took to separate themselves from the organization in reaction to the change process and those involved in it.

The final hidden conflict behavior was ambivalence, which some Council members used to completely emotionally divorce themselves from the organization. Ambivalence occurs when individuals express a lack of interest or concern, especially in situations which normally require them to express feelings or opinions. By withholding one’s thoughts and expressing apathy, these members were able to illustrate an intentional disconnect from the organization. This action differs from withdrawal in that it is more of an intentional removal of oneself from a position of interest in the organization. In this situation, one’s emotions are removed from a situation, whereas in withdrawal, individuals still hold feelings and emotions for the position and hope that by their behaviors, their feelings will become obvious. These behaviors were displayed similarly to those of withdrawal, but ambivalent actions carried more of an apathetic tone. For instance, as the change process was completed and the year drew to a close, the obvious lack of involvement by some Council members in organizational meetings

became clear. Initially, as individuals began to withdraw from the organization they would attend meetings and remain engaged nonverbally, but they would not contribute any opinions. However, as withdrawal shifted to ambivalence, these same individuals were noticeably late to meetings, whispered to one another during meetings, or did other activities such as crossword puzzles during the meetings to express disengagement. Miranda expressed her growing ambivalence with the situation when she said, “I ended up just kind of writing it off at the end of the year and not really worrying about it any more cause it didn’t get much better.” Ambivalence focused on involvement in the Council meetings rather than in the organization as a whole. Paige said some organizational members felt as though, “...this is what’s happening. There’s nothing we can do about it, so there’s no point in talking about it.” The resulting ambivalent behaviors were expressed during Council meetings. However, in conversations with these same individuals, it became clear that their ambivalence applied only to their position on Council because they had chose to shift their entire focus to their specific area of responsibility. As Nathan explained:

I don’t know what the timing exactly was in terms of why we had to do it and I honestly don’t even care any more why it happened, but I really think later on, down the line, they’re going to suffer repercussions for it because it’s just a mess...Honestly I think people were just so apathetic, I mean, we had an older council, I mean I think people who really cared about it, cared about it initially, but when we realized that it wasn’t going to be that many things that we could do about it, I mean the consolation was we aren’t going to be a part of it next year, so I’m just realizing that unfortunately.

This point was made more salient during interviews when these individuals shared the advice they passed on to their successors. They explained that they told their successors to not invest the majority of their attention in the new Council, the leaders or



the overarching body of the organization. Instead, they advised their successors to focus all of their attention on their personal microcosm within the confines of the larger organization. Nathan described the advice he shared with his successor as, “This is what I reemphasized to my successor was to be focused completely on the marketing entity of what she needs to be doing versus getting wrapped up in the bureaucracy of you know of these games that people can present to you and if you aren’t, kind of at least focus on the mission at hand.” This detachment from the organization in which these individuals had invested so much time reinforced the prevalence of the hidden conflict in the SUC Council during the 2006-2007 academic year.

### **Summary**

These behaviors clearly influenced the development and execution of this organizational planned change. The hidden conflict behaviors displayed during this change process can be divided into four categories according to how they were used – as information sharing, connection, anger and bitterness and a form of disconnect. Gossiping and bitching were used throughout the change process, though their purposes shifted and matched the purpose of other hidden conflict behaviors at the same time. In the beginning, gossip was the only hidden conflict behavior used as a mean of sharing information. As organizational members began to reach out and connect with others, they continued to use gossip, but began using strategies such as bitching, coalition formation and questioning to find others who shared their opinions of the organizational change. Once organizational members had joined others with similar perspectives, they began using hidden conflict strategies such as gossip, bitching, humor, alienation,

surveillance and avoidance to express their anger and bitterness over the change situation. As the change initiative drew to a close, individuals desired to disconnect from the organization and began using behaviors such as gossiping, bitching, withdrawal and avoidance to do so. These behaviors are inextricably linked to each other and to the way in which the change unfolded and the ways in which the change continues to be enacted within the organization at present.

Each hidden conflict strategy was related to at least one other strategy either directly or indirectly. Gossip and bitching served as the start of coalition formation during which groups with similar viewpoints were formed. These coalitions, strengthened by the unification around a common set of beliefs, then began to enact other hidden conflict strategies.

One of the main strategies was alienation during which groups coalesced, while also repelling against other individuals with different viewpoints. Another strategy that grew out of coalition formation was humor, which ultimately left the confines of the coalitions and spread to unrelated organizational members. The previously described scenario in which two people sought out another individual's advisor for advice which resulted in avoidance was also related to coalition formation in as much as the parties involved each identified with one particular perspective and acted accordingly. Had these individuals all shared the same opinions and subsequently not been a part of differing factions, the situation would never have occurred. Even hidden conflict strategies, that seemed to be enacted solely by individuals, were related indirectly to other strategies. Surveillance, while enacted in private observations, was inspired by the

factions created during coalition formation and fueled by gossip and bitching. Similarly, withdrawal and ambivalence were enacted individually, but eventually, members of the same group joined together in using these conflict strategies.

As the hidden conflict strategies appeared and developed, the change process was also affected. The initial feelings of discontent and malaise led the Executive Team to include the remainder of Council in the future development of the organizational change initiative. This late willingness to include others caused members of the formed coalitions to become resentful and bitter. As a result, they engaged in other hidden conflict behaviors such as alienation and avoidance. The display of all of these behaviors subsequently made efficient organizational mechanics difficult, thus slowing the advancement of the process. The resentment and bitterness that accumulated during the enactment of these hidden conflict strategies eventually wore on the members, which ultimately caused them to detach themselves from the Council through withdrawal and ambivalence. This withdrawal, in turn, made organizational decisions, even those unrelated to the change process, nearly impossible to make.

The intricate relations among the hidden conflict strategies that the Council members used during the organizational change initiative made for a unique case in which to study hidden conflict and organizational change. The conclusions, limitations and implications of this study will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Organizational change is an extensively studied subject, while hidden conflict is significantly understudied. When engaging in hidden conflict, change is not always an intended outcome (Bartunek, Kolb, & Lewicki, 1992). Bartunek and Reid (1992) found that hidden conflict, while present, did little to affect the organizational change because of its private nature. Instead, the presence of hidden conflict only influenced organizational members' perceptions and experience of the change. Therefore there is a great deal of opportunity for theory building in the field. The information revealed during this research project regarding hidden conflict during an organizational change offered a better understanding of these constructs in light of the research questions used to guide this study.

#### **Research Question One**

*What types and patterns of hidden conflict surface in the organizational change process?*

The hidden conflict behaviors observed in this study can be separated into two primary forms. The first cluster of behaviors was enacted by individuals acting alone for their own personal reasons. The second collection of behaviors was performed by groups of individuals who shared a basic ideology and acted in order to support the group's position. Beyond this basic distinction is the context in which the behavior was enacted. Some behaviors were enacted privately without any intended audience. Others were enacted when individuals were around members of their commensurate group or

other people with similar opinions on the change situation. Finally, others were enacted as a performance in front of oppositional groups or individual members of oppositional groups. This distinction between behaviors enacted as an individual, an individual in a group, or solely as a group has not been included in previous hidden conflict research. Based upon the literature used to inform this research program, there have been two primary classifications of hidden conflict strategies. Morrill (1995) separated hidden conflict behavior based upon the organizational level of the person performing the hidden conflict behavior and the level of the person at whom the hidden conflict behavior is aimed (i.e. peer to peer, superior to subordinate, subordinate to superior, etc.). Anstrand (2006) divided hidden conflict behaviors into hidden conflict strategies “referring to the types of hidden conflicts used in carrying out a conflict act” and communicative forms which are “the communication methods used during a hidden conflict” (p.13).

Most of the behaviors identified during the course of this research had previously been identified in hidden conflict literature, but there were some behaviors that are not found in the extant literature. Gossip, bitching, coalition formation, alienation, surveillance and avoidance have been studied rather extensively as well known behaviors used to express hidden conflict. Questioning and ambivalence have not been identified in any literature as a way to express displeasure with a situation or an individual. Humor and withdrawal, however, have been acknowledged as resistance strategies, but never as hidden conflict strategies. The implications of these findings will be addressed later in this chapter.

One additional pattern that emerged with these behaviors was that the conflict behaviors were directed at people and not the situation. Most organizational change research that has addressed organizational members' negative reactions to a change initiative has focused on the individuals' reactions to the change itself. Therefore, the confirmation that the hidden conflicts in this case were between people, strengthens the argument that hidden conflict is a part of organizational change even though it has not been adequately addressed in the literature.

Some behaviors were executed privately by individuals (Fig. 5.1a), while others were performed by individuals as a way to express their membership and ideological alignment with a specific group (Fig. 5.1b). Yet other individual behaviors were performed by individuals as they interacted with other members of their same opinion group as a way to solidify their place in the group (Fig. 5.1c). All of these individual behaviors were enacted within the confines of a group of individuals who shared the same opinion of the change initiative.

Other behaviors were conducted by groups of people acting as one unit or on behalf of such a group. In some instances, one group would enact hidden conflict behaviors toward another group that had a different opinion of the change situation (Fig. 5.1d). Whereas in the other group strategies the group members would act together to perform the same act of hidden conflict, within these group contexts, individuals would act independently to strengthen the group identity and their place within it (Fig. 5.1e). In these instances, an individual would act on behalf of their group against another opinion group or a member of another opinion group. The distinctions between individual and

group behaviors have not yet been made in literature. Further analysis of these behaviors gives greater insight into the ways in which hidden conflict behaviors were enacted during this organizational change process.

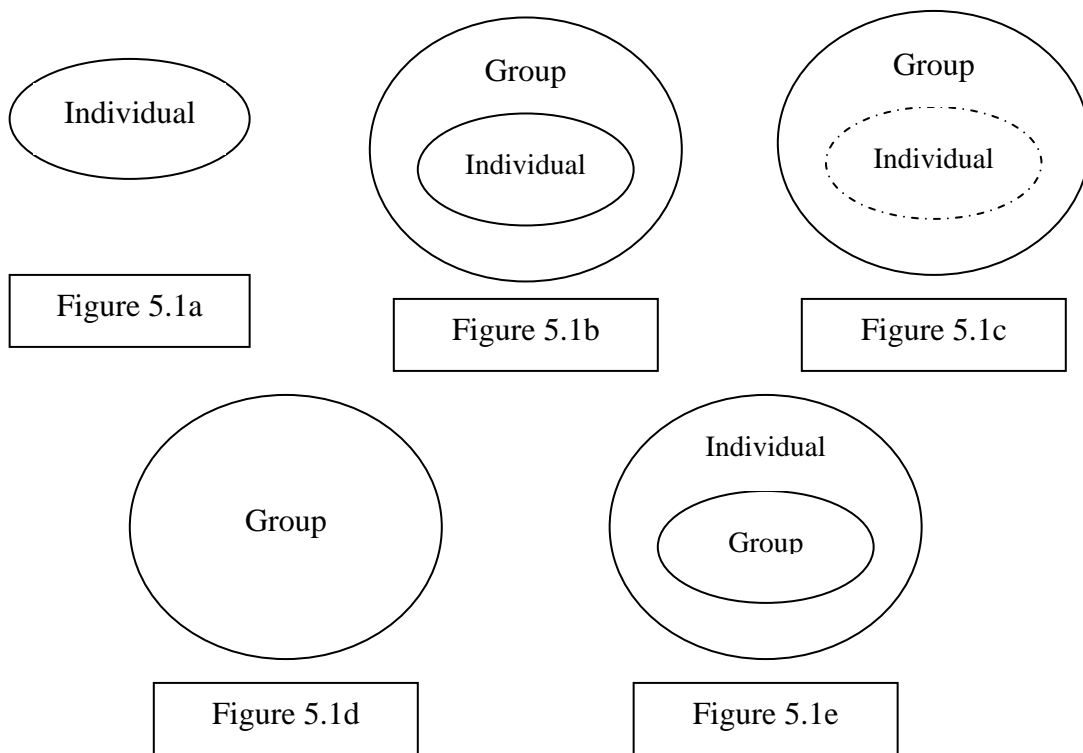


Figure 5.1: Contexts of Individual and Group Enactments of Hidden Conflict

Some of the behaviors were performed by organizational members individually (Fig. 5.1a). The best example of this type of behavior was the surveillance individuals did from their own perspectives. As discussed in Chapter IV, this involved watching the

behaviors of others, waiting for them to fail and utilizing these failures as a justification for the advancement of one's own perspective over the other position which was proven to be flawed. By creating these segmentations of positions based upon perceptions of superiority, organizational members were able to continue and increase their disagreements with others who viewed the organizational change situation differently. Individuals who engaged in this behavior observed what others did and then formulated their own conclusions about what those actions meant as it related to the mental schema that the observer had of the individual and the situation. This information would then be used to strengthen the individual's belief that others were behaving incorrectly or in a manner detrimental to the organization, which subsequently strengthened their opinion that they were correct while the others were wrong to reinforce their incompatible goals. Though the observations made may have been shared with others, the actual action of surveillance, the interpretation of what was witnessed, keeping record of wrongs and justifying a reason to disagree was very personal.

Other behaviors, such as avoidance, withdrawal and ambivalence were individual behaviors within the context of a larger group scenario (Fig. 5.1b). These behaviors were used by individuals to indicate their affiliation with a particular group. By acting in this way, they demonstrated solidarity with their fellow group members through physical expressions of the group's ideological opinion of the situation. Through avoidance, individuals attempted to prevent any contact with other organizational members, whether that be in meetings or other official interactions or even in passing the person with whom they had a disagreement in the hall. Withdrawal occurred as



organizational members began to step away from the activities of the Council physically, vocally and emotionally in an attempt to make their objections about the change process quietly obvious. Ambivalence, while very similar to withdrawal, was enacted in a very similar manner. Yet, whereas in withdrawal there was a continued interest in the organization, but no desire to make this interest clear, ambivalence was marked in a loss of interest in the organization and its outcomes almost as a way to express to those who had disparate opinions that nothing they could do would have any impact because those individuals no longer cared. These actions themselves were initiated by an individual as a personal display of displeasure or disagreement. However, in order to be effectively demonstrated as an individual action, the group context was necessary.

The final types of individual hidden conflict behaviors required not only a group context with which to identify, but also interaction with others in that group (Fig. 5.1c). Gossiping, bitching, questioning and humor were behaviors organizational members chose to enact personally, but did so only when they were able to interact with members of their opinion group. Gossip was used in a variety of ways, ranging from gaining information about the impending change and finding others who shared one's opinion, to sharing negative information about other organizational members. This interactive behavior allowed organizational members to find and bond with other individuals who shared their perspective of the change situation, thereby creating an opinion group. Like gossip, bitching was also used for a number of different purposes. As would be expected, it was used to complain to others in one's opinion group about not being more included in the change initiative and the actions of others in the organization.

Individuals used questioning as a way to verbalize their disagreement without doing so expressly. By continually asking the same questions in meetings, they were able to convey that the answers being given to them, and therefore the situations being described, were unsatisfying. This behavior was also a forum through which organizational members were able to find others who agreed with their respective stances on the organizational change issue. The element of interaction was exceptionally important for this hidden conflict strategy because the question needed to be asked and answered (even if being ignored was the response given) in order for the behavior to be effective.

Finally, humor was used as a way to safely express disapproval of the situation and individuals involved in it. Through sarcastic comments and jokes, organizational members conveyed their negative opinions about organizational members or the outcome of the change initiative. As this behavior became more prevalent, members of the same opinion group were able to bandy their jests and build off of the jokes made by others. This interaction further strengthened the group identity.

Whereas avoidance, withdrawal and ambivalence only needed a group to act in or act against, this set of behaviors needed to be an integral part of in-group interaction to be effective. In as much as these behaviors were communicative in nature, they would have been completely ineffectual without other individuals to listen and respond. Therefore, they were noticeably executed in the midst of in-group interactions.

While these behaviors needed a group context to solidify the individual nature of the action, other behaviors were enacted as a group. At this point groups took on their

own identities and began to act as one entity. These delineations between groups were based on the shared opinions of members about the change initiative. The first set of group initiated behaviors involved groups forming and defining their existence as an entity separate from other groups based on a shared ideology (Fig. 5.1d). Coalition formation was the best example of this behavior. In enacting this hidden conflict strategy, organizational members found others who shared their perspectives on the change process, either for or against, and joined together united by these shared beliefs. Groups formed and soon became their own unit based upon a shared ideology. This was the case both for those that supported the organizational change process and those who did not. Eventually, the groups began to act as a whole, meaning the individuals involved acted on behalf of the group rather than for themselves.

Though never directly addressed, these groups became a recognized entity that polarized the organization and acted as a hidden conflict strategy in and of itself and as an impetus for further expressions of hidden conflict. As the identity of each group became more solidified, the differences between groups became equally apparent. Therefore, creating a group was an act of hidden conflict. By separating from the Council as a whole, these groups created a separatist sect. The behaviors these groups engaged in, based upon their beliefs about the organizational change, were covertly conflictual against other groups in that they expressed their disagreement and perception of incompatible goals.

Upon the formation of the groups, one behavior that was enacted solely by groups was that of alienation. This strategy was most demonstrated by one group

preventing another group, or representatives of another group, from being party to discussions, meetings, or official communications. These behaviors extended beyond the borders of official organizational business and impacted social interactions, as well. Each set of groups – for or against the change – practiced this behavior against the other group to express their disagreement with the other's position. Groups would also alienate individuals, but never the reverse because it is difficult for an individual to alienate others from a personal activity.

Like with individual behaviors that required a group context to be effectively enacted, there were group behaviors that required the actions of individuals to make the hidden conflict strategy more salient for the bolstering of the group identity (Fig. 5.1e). Previous individual actions were intended to strengthen in-group ties. These specific behaviors differed from the previous individual actions because these individual-as-a-group-member behaviors were focused on acting against another group or member of another group. They had an external, rather than internal focus.

In strengthening their group identities, group members would practice behaviors such as gossiping, bitching and humor as individuals for a group. Through these behaviors, organizational members were able to create a kind of reinforcement loop of their group identity. Individuals would gossip, bitch or joke to other members of their particular faction about individuals with other perceptions about the change. As a result of these actions, the position of the group would become strengthened which would result in more of these behaviors and continue in a cyclical fashion.

In these situations, it differed from when these same behaviors were performed as individuals for their own purposes in a group context – the intent shifted from personal gain to benefiting the group as a whole. The prevalence of these behaviors for the benefit of the group held a certain performative element. They were enacted as a performative display for the other group members as a way to show one's identification with the group. Given the close link with organizational factions, these behaviors began to emerge as coalition formation and became a significant hidden conflict strategy and in essence, strengthened this behavior as well.

### **Research Question Two**

*How did hidden conflict patterns differ over time as the organizational change process evolved?*

The most well-known and heavily utilized pattern of conflict was that developed by Pondy (1967). It follows the order of latent, perceived, felt and manifest conflict and the aftermath these cause. Even though this is a widely accepted view of conflict formation, it does not apply in all situations. The key characteristic of this class model is manifest conflict, or the point at which a conflict surfaces and disputants openly address each other. Pondy (1967) acknowledged that it was possible to skip stages in this pattern, though most conceptualizations of conflict understand each step to be necessary for a conflict to occur. It is at this point that this model loses its broad usability. In hidden conflicts, the disputing parties never openly address each other. Instead, the process skips from felt conflict to the conflict aftermath. While this does fit the classic

model to a point, it is possible that another pattern – utilizing different breakpoints – would make understanding the hidden conflict process easier.

The organizational change cycle in this case was divided into four distinct sections – 1) prior to the announcement of the organizational change initiative, 2) introduction of the organizational change, 3) problems arising with the planning and implementation of the change, and 4) after the change was completed. As a result, new patterns of hidden conflict emerged at each of these stages. Each phase of the change process introduced a new set of challenges and problems which resulted in new reactions to the situation. Although the hidden conflict patterns were not necessarily defined by the stage at which they appeared, there was a noteworthy correlation between the shift in a stage of the change process and the introduction of new hidden conflict behaviors. Importantly, breakpoints in the change process also reveal shifts in the underlying emotions in the conflict.

For approximately four weeks prior to the actual change process, organizational members engaged in information seeking hidden conflict behaviors as ways to cope with their feelings of shock and a fear of the unknown. Surprised by the knowledge that a significant event was being planned without their knowledge, Council members developed a desire to learn more. Therefore, gossip was utilized by these members as a way not only to learn more, but to also express their discontent at not being informed upfront about the impending organizational development which intensified their surprise and uncertainty.

The type of hidden conflict behaviors shifted within the first 2.5 months after the change was introduced. In this period, once enough information had been shared to sufficiently understand the situation, organizational members began to enact hidden conflict behaviors intended to find others who shared their opinions either for or against the change initiative. These behaviors included gossip, bitching, coalition building and questioning. The behaviors used in this stage reflected the need for the organization's members to find social support in others who shared their perceptions. These behaviors were also meant as a form of subtle persuasion. Individuals tried to convince other members of their perspective on the organizational change and the way Executive Team was handling it. They hoped that by convincing others of their position, those individuals would join in their opinion, thereby creating a larger organizational faction. This latter use was less successful in as much as most people had already formulated their own opinions and therefore were not willing to be swayed. Though enacted both in and out of meetings, the forming of differing factions was understated as individuals did not want others to perceive their need to group with others or be considered a problem for the organization.

The types of hidden conflict behaviors shifted again as problems with the change process arose in the next 3.5 month period. After groups were formed based upon shared beliefs, and problems arose in the change process, the hidden conflict behaviors shared a common underlying feeling of anger and bitterness. Resentful feelings motivating these behaviors became obvious in the interviews as individuals described their actions and the actions of others. They explained that the anger and bitterness were

aimed at other organizational members, rather than the change itself. They stated that this was a result of the different positions that individuals had on the organizational change. The way these individuals were advancing their positions also had impact. The groups opposed to the change used hidden conflict strategies while those supporting the change used managerial directives. Individuals of each group disapproved of the way members of the other group were advancing their position, thereby increasing feelings of anger and bitterness.

In the next stage, during the final two months of the academic year and the conclusion of the change process, the hidden conflict behaviors shifted to disconnect from the situation. The defeat suffered by those displaying hidden conflict behaviors because their actions did not change the opinions of others, led them to feel a sense of helplessness. While this helplessness led them to remove themselves from their Council functions without fanfare, their silence subsequently was quite attention-getting. The patterns of hidden conflict, both as emotions and through the phases of the actual change, are illustrated in Figure 5.2. This pattern of emotions driving hidden conflict strategies mirrors that of other coping processes, such as Kübler-Ross's (1969) grief process; however, these hidden conflict patterns also affected the actual organizational change process.



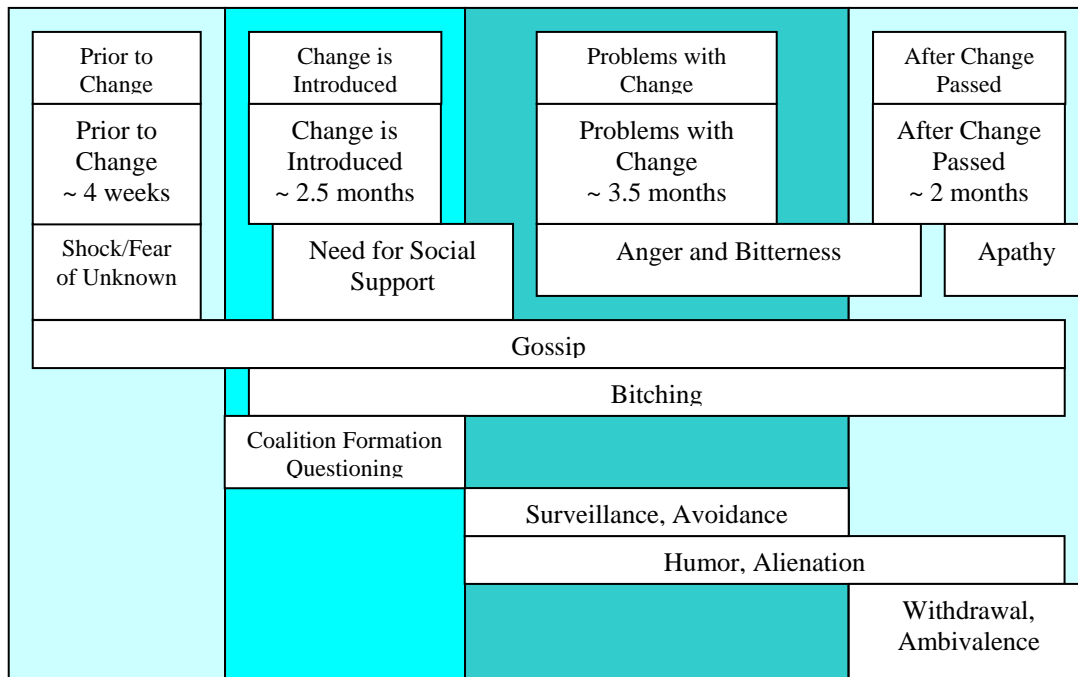


Figure 5.2: Hidden Conflict Strategies and Emotion during the Phases of the Change

### Research Question Three

*What roles do types and patterns of hidden conflict play in the organizational change process and how might they influence the change development?*

Hidden conflict was a significant factor in the organizational change process experienced in the SUC. The presence and expression of these behaviors on behalf of the organizational members led to a deceleration of the change process. When the change initiative was first introduced, it was assumed that it would take very little time until the change was implemented. However, as hidden conflict behaviors began to increase in frequency and intensity, the leadership of the Council felt compelled to alter their plans for the change in order to appease Council members and hopefully reduce the

expression of these hidden conflict behaviors. Further, through expressions of hidden conflict, Council members were able share their opinions of the situation, which led to altering their perceptions of the change and its ramifications for the organization.

Typically, these behaviors also worked to reinforce the opinions previously formed by the individuals on Council.

One area in which this reinforcement of established opinions was most significant dealt with an issue unrelated to the organizational change. As members enacted their chosen hidden conflict strategies, other members who witnessed these passive displays of disapproval found the behaviors to be immature and detrimental to the purpose and advancement of the organization. This determination ultimately led these individuals to develop new, and often, negative opinions of their peers because of their display of hidden conflict behavior. Additionally, as the change process advanced, the hidden conflict behaviors left the topical confines of the organizational change and began to have an impact on the broader organization. Council members began to express their emotions through hidden conflict behaviors when addressing organizational plans and initiatives unrelated to the change, which resulted in outcomes similar to those experienced when these individuals used the same behaviors in response to the organizational change.

These observations demonstrate that hidden conflict behaviors were prevalent in the organization and had a strong influence on how the change developed over time. Early in the change process, the hidden conflict behaviors demonstrated by organizational members resulted in more opportunities for involvement in the change.

As members of Executive Team realized that other Council members were engaging in behaviors such as gossiping, bitching and excessive questioning, they decided to offer them more opportunities to give input on the way in which the change should be planned and executed.

Previous research has indicated that an increase in member involvement leads to a smoother, more accepted organizational change process (Van Knippenberg, Martin, & Tyler, 2006; Manring, 2003; Karim, 2006; Langer & Thorup, 2006). Van Knippenberg et al. (2006) advocated that this increase in member involvement be executed via open and full communication with opportunities for member responses. The literature suggests that organizations allow members to witness how their input had been acknowledged and utilized in the change initiative. This allowed members to see their place in the organization and feel a part of the situation. Subsequently, if they feel as though they are an integral part of the process, they are more likely to support it. However, organizations should adopt this approach from the beginning of a change process to maintain an appearance of interest in the organizational constituents throughout the process.

The research conducted that led to these results examined organizational studies in which either opportunities for involvement were offered throughout the change process which was found to lead to successful changes, or studies in which opportunities for involvement were not offered, ultimately resulting in failed organizational change attempts. (Fedor, Caldwell, & Herold, 2006; Ford & Pasmore, 2006; Van Knippenberg,

et al., 2006; Manring, 2003). These studies did not, however, look at the introduction of member involvement in the midst of an organizational change.

In the case studied, however, the inclusion of organizational members in the change initiative came after the change plans had been developed and was intended to serve as an appeasement of the members concerns and frustrations for being excluded from the process. As it became clear that there was some malaise among organizational members at their lack of inclusion in the process, leaders of the change initiative decided to offer agency. While this was a gesture intended to placate those who were displeased, it was clear to those newly included in the process that their opinions, in fact, were not wanted and would not be given proper credence. Therefore, in this instance, offering participation in the change process was ineffective and actually worsened the disgruntlement of organizational members.

Throughout the change, the hidden conflict behaviors displayed both in and out of meetings slowed the process and altered the perception of the change initiative. Once it became clear through hidden conflict behaviors that Council members were not going to automatically approve the organizational changes as they had been developed by the Executive Team, those pushing for the change were forced to create a new strategy for implementing the change initiative. This new strategy included seeking the input of other organizational members regarding the change plans. By seeking more opinions, the issues raised by other Council members were taken into consideration, thereby altering the original change plans which caused a slowing of the change process. Furthermore, the focus some members placed on enacting their hidden conflict behaviors

as a way to demonstrate their unhappiness with the situation took their attention away from the advancement or improvement of the existing change plans.

As the prevalence of hidden conflict behaviors increased during the change process, the perception of the change and the organizational members on both sides of the issue shifted. At the beginning of the organizational change, it was perceived as a necessary evil; however, as the change evolved, it became just an annoyance and a distraction. When initially presented, the organizational change creating a new Board of Directors was cast as an inevitable certainty and was reluctantly approached as one. However, once hidden conflict behaviors began to be used to express anger and bitterness, the change was viewed as a negative because of the schisms it created among the Council, which took away from their ability to effectively lead the organization as a whole. As individuals began to display various hidden conflict behaviors in response to the actions of others as they pertained to the organizational change, the way in which they were perceived by their peers began to change, as well.

Specifically, as individuals would enact behaviors that expressed their disapproval for others, at the expense of focusing on their own position or bettering the organization, other members viewed their actions, and therefore the person, as immature and unfocused. Some individuals began to be viewed as difficult or as a hindrance to the organization. These opinions of others altered the way in which these members worked together and led some organizational members dread working with them.

The appearance of hidden conflict behaviors as a result of the organizational change effected the broader organization outside of change initiative. With the presence

of hidden conflict behaviors beginning to be felt among Council members, the focus of the Council and its members was altered. Since the Executive Team had planned on the change process going smoothly and quickly, when hidden conflict emerged as a result of the situation, the Council began to spend the majority of its time discussing and altering the change plans, instead of working on other organizational initiatives such as programming and student development. Some individuals felt the hidden conflict so strongly that they began to expend a great deal of their energy on expressing their own discontent through hidden conflict or similarly responding to the hidden conflict behaviors displayed by others, instead of focusing on their position and its responsibilities for the organization.

At the conclusion of the year, as all of the emotions behind the hidden conflict were still fresh, organizational members transitioned their successor into their current positions. Thus, they socialized newcomers into the hidden conflict processes. During this process, the Council members involved in the change warned their successors of what to anticipate in their new positions based upon their personal experience that year. A great deal of this information was related to the hidden conflict experienced by organizational members which ultimately colored their perception of the organizational positions and the ways in which they believed it would be for the individuals taking their places. As such, once these new Council members assumed their roles, they approached their role anticipating the same experiences their predecessors described; and, wishing to avoid similar situations, they altered their behaviors accordingly.

The display of hidden conflict behaviors instead of overt expressions of displeasure, especially as the year drew to a close, can be connected to the realizations of organizational members that they would soon be exiting the organization. The transitory nature of student organizations necessitates that individuals hold their posts for a limited time. As such, the individuals involved in this organizational change and the subsequent hidden conflict behaviors were forced to engage in a cost-benefit analysis of speaking out against the change and bringing conflict to the surface at the risk of losing relationships or keeping their discontent hidden in an effort to maintain their preexisting personal relationships with other organizational members.

Once individuals realized that the change was going to occur regardless of their personal opinions, they were forced to resign to the new reality. Some even realized that the change was not as significant as initially believed; however, they were disgruntled at the way in which the situation was handled. These beliefs led to a continuation of hidden conflict behaviors, particularly those of withdrawal and ambivalence. While organizational members were resigning themselves to the inevitability of the change, they wished to continue to express displeasure with those enforcing the change without risking permanent damage to their personal relationships. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of some members to hide conflict in order to spare relationships, many personal relationships within Council which were strong at the beginning of the year were marred resulting in strained relations or no friendship at all up to the present.

## **Implications of Research**

The implications of this research for the fields of organizational change, hidden conflict, and the combination of the two during this research are significant. The hidden conflict strategies exhibited by those interviewed during the 2006-2007 SUC organizational change both substantiate previous hidden conflict research and add to it.

### *Hidden Conflict Behaviors*

While most of the hidden conflict strategies discussed have been reviewed in extant literature, there were some strategies that have never before been identified. As noted earlier, questioning and ambivalence have not been previously identified as forms of hidden conflict. In this case, questioning was utilized as a way to discreetly communicate displeasure, while also attempting to find others who shared one's viewpoint. Questioning was manifested as asking the same question, either using the same words or rephrasing repeatedly, despite the offering of an adequate answer. Further, questioning was used as a way to express a lack of confidence in the Council leadership by asking questions about mundane tasks and details indicating that the person asking the question did not trust the other individual's plan for or approach to the situation.

Ambivalence was utilized as way to express exasperation with the way in which the organizational change process was handled by other Council members. Through arriving late to meetings, doing crossword puzzles during these same meetings and other similar behaviors, organizational members effectively communicated that they were no longer interested in the work of the Council as an executive body. Most of the members



who engaged in these behaviors had, prior to the change process, been vocal, involved members of the Council, therefore making their silence obvious. However, so many members were engaging in this behavior that ambivalence was often met by ambivalence from other organizational members, thus avoiding a conflictual situation. This introduction of new hidden conflict practices holds great potential for the field for hidden conflict research, as well as organizational change research in the acknowledgement that the two occur concurrently.

#### *Emotion during an Organizational Change*

The patterns of hidden conflict displayed during the change process brought to light an interesting element of this organizational change - a progression of emotion. While research has identified emotional processes and patterns in organizational changes (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Craine, 2007), this study offered a new perspective. Most of this research attempted to ascertain what emotions individuals felt as the emotions pertained to one's role in, and ability to impact, the change process (Bartunek, et al., 2006; Liu & Perrewé, 2005). Other research has found that as organizational members cope with the significance of a change initiative, they experience emotions similar to the grieving process typically reserved for coping with death or loss of relationships (Craine, 2007; Kübler-Ross, 1969).

This study indicated that organizational members experience a series of emotions during an organizational change. These emotions were displayed through the use of hidden conflict behaviors. The emotions began with shock, transformed into vulnerability which gave way to anger and bitterness and concluded with helplessness

and apathy. The findings of this study differ from previous research in the actual emotions felt both during the process and after the final outcome of the change.

Whereas previous research focused on emotions as they related to the change in general or as a coping mechanism, this study revealed that the organizational members in this case experienced different emotions with each new phase in the change process.

Furthermore, the emotions experienced, while similar to those of the traditional grieving process, did not end with acceptance, but rather with a desire to leave the situation and continued negative feelings. Figure 5.3 displays different models of the emotion process.

The emotions underlying the hidden conflict behaviors enacted during this organizational change had a significant impact not only on the change initiative, but also on the organization as a whole. The emotions began neutrally as organizational members attempted to make sense of the situation. However, in the absence of positive messages or effective persuasion to convince these same members that the other individuals in the SUC with differing opinions were not enemies or a threat to them personally, a divide occurred among the group. This divide resulted in heavily fortified sectors within the organization – those for and those against the change. As the factions became more strongly entrenched in their positions, the focus of each became less on finding a successful end to the feud or efficient executive of change initiative. Rather, the focus was on strengthening one's position while disregarding the position of others.

As emotions continued to fester to a fever pitch of negativity, the emphasis on personal differences led the change initiative to be caught in the middle of the feud and

somewhat overlooked by some members. Once the intense negative emotions proved ineffectual in altering the opinions of other organizational members and altering the change process, fatigue appeared to set in and eventually gave way to apathy. This apathy applied not only to the change initiative but to the organization as a whole by members of both perspective groups. The emotions experienced and expressed by SUC Council members were a significant factor in the change process, in as much as they became a focus of individual attention, at times seemingly more so than the actual business of the organization.

Kübler-Ross (1969) Grief Process

**Denial → Anger and Blame → Bargaining → Depression → Acceptance**

Craine (2007) The Change Cycle

**Confidence and Complacency → Resentment → Depression → Acceptance**

This study: Emotion in Organizational Change through Hidden Conflict

**Shock & Fear → Social Support → Anger and Bitterness → Apathy**

Figure 5.3 – Models of the Process of Emotion

#### *Hidden Conflict versus Resistance*

As was evident in the reactions of organizational members to this change, the feelings of anger and bitterness were directed at individuals involved in the change – whether for or against – rather than the change itself. This differs from previous understandings of member discontent during organizational change. Typically, these

opinions are enacted as a resistance to the change initiative and/or the organization (Amburgey, Kelly, & Barnett, 1993). In general, personal interactions as a result of an organizational change have not been studied. This could be because of the tendency of these behaviors to occur covertly (Boulding, 1963) or because the focus of these studies has been more on the actual organizational change rather than on individuals' attempts to negotiate their roles in the situation with other organizational members.

Regardless of the reason, personal interactions during an organizational change are an important topic of study, especially the divide between resistance and hidden conflict. Despite the expressed difficulty in clearly and adequately defining the concept of resistance, Prasad and Prasad (1998) define resistance as “any subversive action directly intended to damage and/or disrupt the functioning of an organization” as a function of coping with power structures that seek control over the lives of individuals (p. 226). It is through acts of resistance that individuals find ways to cope with the differing power structures that attempt to dominate their lives. Organizational members subjected to such forms of power enact resistance strategies for a variety of reasons including “deflecting abuse,...regulating the amount and intensity of work,...defending autonomy,... and manipulating participation opportunities” (Hodson, 1995, p. 80).

These conceptualizations assume that resistant behaviors are aimed at altering the dominating power structure of an organization, which, based upon the interviews, is not the way in which the behaviors of humor and withdrawal were utilized in this organizational change context. Instead, these behaviors were used to express disagreement and a difference in perspective with other organizational members. This

conceptualization agrees more closely with the definition of hidden conflict. Hidden conflict is understood to be conflict as it is traditionally defined – interrelated parties with incompatible goals – but enacted in a covert manner (Morrill & Thomas, 1992). Based upon these formulations, resistance is considered an attempt to reject the hegemonic control of an organization while hidden conflict is a secret disagreement between individuals.

Previous understandings of malaise during an organizational change have been termed “resistance”, but in this instance, behaviors that had not been considered hidden conflict, but rather resistance, were found to actually be a form of hidden conflict based upon the distinction made above. Namely, humor and withdrawal were found to be forms of hidden conflict utilized by SUC Council members during the organizational change process. This label was assigned to these behaviors because of the way in which they were enacted. Therefore, in this instance, humor and withdrawal were used as a way to express their displeasure of incompatible goals with other parties. This differs from how these behaviors would be understood as resistance.

Even though these explanations of resistance make clear that acts of resistance are purposive for combating power structures, some actions can be used to both express one’s belief that there are incompatible goals with another party *and* to attempt to fight against the hegemonic structure constraining an individual. It is possible that a behavior that can be used both as hidden conflict and resistance shifts its purpose as an organizational member comes to realizations about the situation. If the behavior begins as hidden conflict against an individual, once the perpetrator realizes that it is not the

individual, but rather the individual's role in the organization as a power structure that is propelling that situation, the behavior will shift to one of resistance against that organizational power. Similarly, as the perpetrator of a resistant behavior becomes aware that their actions will not alter the power of the organization and subsequently experience emotional resignation to that effect, they may shift the focus of their behavior to the individual working on behalf of the organization in resentment that the person is allowing the situation to occur, thereby enacting hidden conflict. This assertion, however, does not negate the potential of similar behaviors being used with multiple purposes – both hidden conflict and resistance – in other organizational contexts depending upon the situation and the perceived threat felt among the actors. These differentiations may seem trivial and difficult to identify in practice; however, making these distinctions aids in theory building for these two constructs.

This observation suggests that the ubiquitous relationship between hidden conflict and resistance may be both more complex and more segmented than previously believed. Based upon the definitions previously given, hidden conflict can be considered behaviors against an individual while resistance can be considered behaviors against an organization or the initiatives of an organization, such as an organizational change. Utilizing our understanding of the concept of resistance from different fields such as physics and pharmacology, it becomes clear that there must be some kind of force acting against something in order for resistance to occur.

As discussed above, typically in organizational studies, this force is organizational power or hegemony. Therefore, resistant acts against organizational

members would not necessarily be against these individuals personally, but rather the power these individuals held within their organizational role. As a result, were an individual to make a personal attack against another organizational member, the behavior would necessarily be considered conflict, rather than resistance since that person's organizational power is not at issue. Simply put, if organizational power is an issue, an action is considered resistance, but if power is not an issue and the situation is personal, any subsequent action is considered hidden conflict.

However, it is difficult to determine if behaviors individuals choose to enact to express displeasure within their organization are directed at other individuals or at the organization or manifestations of the organization's domination as its own entity is difficult. It is quite possible that some organizational members would have difficulty divorcing their dislike of an organizational initiative from the person enforcing it and vice versa. Nonetheless, if it were possible to make these divisions clear, the understanding of both hidden conflict and resistance and their effect on organizations would greatly increase.

#### *Organizational Change in a High Turnover Organization*

As is evidenced by the divide between hidden conflict behaviors and resistance, there are a variety of methods used by organization members in dealing with an organizational change. Outside the bounds of these specific behaviors, individuals are faced with a larger choice in how to react to an unwanted change – resist the change, exit the organization or attempt to voice an opinion opposing the situation. We have already discussed resistance. However, an alternative frequent reaction to an undesirable change

is a physical exit from an organization, thereby allowing an individual to wield power over an organization by expressing ultimate dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970).

However, in the absence of an exit option or, if exit is not desired, one alternative is to use the option of voice or “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30). The relationship between these two options is inverse, meaning that the greater the likelihood of exit, the less likely voice will be used and vice versa. Therefore in choosing between these two approaches, a number of factors can influence the outcome. A most significant factor is one’s loyalty to an organization. Hirschman (1970) found “the likelihood of voice increases with the degree of loyalty” (p. 77).

While the dichotomy created in this example is certainly a useful analysis, it is not necessarily applicable to all situations. In the organization studied in this research project, organizational exit after one year is expected. Considering the reality that the SUC is a student organization on a university campus, individuals enter their position knowing that they will hold that title for one year after which time they will exit. This is especially true for individuals on Council since most have worked their way up the organizational ranks to fill these positions during their final year at the university. Therefore, the majority of individuals on Council knew that after their tenure, they would not only leave their position, but also the organization.

This knowledge most likely impacted the reactions of organizational members to the change. Since eventual exit was already assumed at the introduction of the change, the loyalty these individuals had to the organization led them to remain in their positions.



However, whereas voice typically becomes a strategy for expressing displeasure with change in most organizations (Hirschman, 1970), in this case, individuals who knew that they were going to exit instead chose to use hidden conflict strategies.

Two of these hidden conflict strategies – withdrawal and ambivalence – were ways in which individuals prematurely chose to exit the organization, even while they were still in position. While not a complete physical exit, individuals who enacted these behaviors were leaving the situation symbolically by no longer participating in the organization as they previously had. This use of “exit” could explain the reason for resignation as an outgrowth of previous attempts to express discontent, ones that were unsuccessful. As such, it is possible that the hidden conflict behaviors displayed by the organizational members during the change process were a form of voice, even though the “voice” was seemingly silent.

### **Limitations**

All care was taken during the planning and execution of this study to ensure that all information gathered and conclusions made would be as accurate as possible; however, there were some situations which may have limited this research. One of the potentially strongest hindrances to this research is the time at which it was conducted in relation to when the change occurred. As has been previously established, the change process took place during the 2006-2007 academic year beginning in August 2006 and ending in April 2007. The interview portion of the research, however, did not begin until all of the necessary paperwork was completed and the research proposal had been defended in November 2007. Subsequently, several of those interviewed alluded to an

inability to remember specific instances of the change process. Therefore, the information that was shared was perceived to be the most significant, suggesting there is a possibility that other hidden conflict strategies were used during this process but were less obvious and therefore less memorable.

Another constraint related to the amount of information gathered during the research process involved the actual interview process. Entering this research, I was anticipating interviewing all members of SUC Council during the time period being studied; however, this proved to be infeasible. Considering the time that had elapsed between the time of the organizational change to the time the research began, several of those I intended to interview had left the organization. Several of individuals I wanted to interview, including three Council members, either graduated or received internships at the end of the 2007 school year and began time intensive jobs and further schooling, which resulted in them not having time to speak with me.

When I was able speak with those who had moved on from the organization, it was not in the medium I had hoped. For those individuals still present at the university, interviews were conducted in person, thereby allowing me to tailor the interview to the nonverbal reactions interviewees had to particular subjects or questions. However, for those who had left the university, interviews were conducted over the phone which prohibited me from being able to pick up on subtle nuances such as fidgeting or inconsistent eye contact, which could have allowed me to conduct a more thorough and comprehensive interview. In rare instances, the interviews were conducted over e-mail which was less than ideal. These instances prevented me from noting both body

language and vocal inflection. However, in the absence of other options, this method did allow me to receive a greater variety of perspectives of the change process even though the way in which it was gathered was less than ideal.

Time and medium of communication may have had an impact on the information given during interviews, but the sensitivity of the topic most likely played a significant role in the responses interviewees gave, as well. The fact that this research sought to better understand hidden conflict indicates that those involved in conflictual situations were wary to make their feelings openly known even during the organizational change, so it follows that they would be equally as hesitant, if not more so, to divulge this information after the fact. The previous acquaintanceships and friendships I had developed with those interviewed most likely made them more comfortable discussing these issues, but there may still have been some elements of self-restraint and a desire to maintain a positive, passive image. At the conclusion of several interviews, those interviewed nervously asked how their words would be used and in what way they would be published indicating they were concerned they might be perceived negatively because of the information they shared. This situation would seem to signify that they had been almost uncomfortably candid, but there remains the potential they still withheld some information for fear of how those feelings or statements would reflect on them. Despite the possibility that this nervousness influenced the responses given during interviews, the triangulation of methods used in this research showed a consistency in responses and the feelings of those involved in the change. The written artifacts and

participant observation supported the findings of the interviews indicating that the information gained during the interviews was accurate.

Finally, the general situation may have had a significant impact on the results observed. The SUC is a student run organization. Subsequently, the students involved are young adults with limited experience in such settings. Considering that for many of those involved, this was their first exposure to an organizational change, the way in which it was handled may have been more reactionary than it would have been for more experienced individuals who are more prepared for similar scenarios.

Further, since this is a student organization, the turnover is inevitable. In almost every case, an individual holds their position for only one year. The knowledge that they would be leaving the position soon may have decreased the desire of some organizational members to be forceful in expressing displeasure with change, realizing that in a few months, it would have no impact on them. In addition, many individuals held close relationships with others in the organization and had maintained these relationships for some time. These relationships could have led the members to avoid making their disagreement too obvious so as to prevent a situation which would significantly strain their preexisting relationships. Unfortunately, the disagreements that arose during the change process did negatively impact some of these relationships. The unique nature of the organization certainly had an impact on the study, but does not completely discount the findings revealed.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The issues introduced by the outcome of this research offer several potential areas of future research. This research has demonstrated that hidden conflict does exist during organizational change. Up to this point in time, the only researcher to extensively study the link of these two subjects has been Bartunek (Bartunek, 1993, 2003; Bartunek & Reid, 1992). Subsequently, it would be beneficial for others to research this subject to add to the current body of knowledge. Additional methods and approaches to studying the topic could ensure that all angles are considered in understanding the presence and effect of hidden conflict on organizational changes.

During the interview and research process, several new hidden conflict strategies were discovered. Questioning and ambivalence were identified for the first time, while humor and withdrawal – previously understood to be acts of resistance – were all found to be used by SUC Council members as a way to enact hidden conflict. Future research would be beneficial for understanding if these strategies are indeed widely used hidden conflict behaviors. Again, different contexts in which hidden conflict might be used would help determine the veracity of these behaviors as a way to express conflict covertly. If these behaviors were found to be used in other situations and contexts, it should then be determined if the concepts were operationalized similarly to the findings of this research and future research for the benefit of adding to our conceptualization of this behavior pattern.

As the interviews were analyzed, it was found that hidden conflict patterns related to similar emotions were synchronized with the phases of the organizational

change. It was then realized that the emotional phases displayed during this change differed from those previously studied during organizational changes. Further study of emotional phases during organizational change should not only focus on emotional changes as they relate to involvement or as a coping mechanism, but as they appear in the process of the organizational change itself. Additionally, such studies should look at emotions as they are practiced, through behaviors like hidden conflict, rather than only looking for their presence.

Finally, this study raised interesting questions about the relationship of hidden conflict and resistance, not only during organizational changes, but in general, as well. Clearer definitions of each of these constructs would make future research easier; but in their absence, maintaining the perspective that hidden conflict involves disagreements between people while resistance involves dissatisfaction with an organization, would offer a new perspective. Approaching research from this perspective could allow for an expansion of research attempting to understand these behaviors. Moreover, if greater cooperation were to develop among the numerous fields and theoretical views that study these behaviors (Prasad & Prasad, 1998; Putnam, Grant, & Michelson, 2005), the potential increases further.

## **Conclusions**

The results and implications of this research have shown that hidden conflict is not only present during an organizational change, but can have a significant impact on the change process. In this case, the change was perceived by some to be non-participatory, which most likely added to the presence and prevalence of hidden conflict

behaviors. Based on previous research and the results of this study, it is clear that more participation in the process would have made for a more successful and efficient change, but this is not always feasible. Even in the presence of more member involvement, it is safe to assume that hidden conflict would be a part of any organizational change initiative. As such, based upon the findings of this project, hidden conflict should be treated as a real expression of disagreement.

Despite the fact that the hidden conflict behaviors were intended to avoid overt expressions of conflict, they should not be ignored or overlooked simply because they occur in private spaces. Rather, it should be anticipated by all parties to the situation. As soon as hidden conflict behaviors begin to appear, organizational members need to determine the emotion behind these actions. For instance, should coalition formation be noted, it should be determined whether the behavior is intended to release tension or attempt to alter the perceptions of others for the change and ultimately disrupt the change process.

If the organization's members believe that the behaviors they are witnessing could potentially alter perceptions of the change or disrupt the process, the individuals witnessing these behaviors should try to discuss the situation with the persons displaying the behaviors. These discussions should be presented as individuals taking an interest in the feelings of all organizational constituents instead of the organization disciplining members for abhorrent behavior. Should behaviors resulting from feelings of anger and bitterness or disconnection and apathy begin to emerge, the organization and the change initiative within it are at risk. Therefore, the organizational members should begin to

address these feelings both privately and in open forums. While it is quite likely that individuals will not be willing to openly share these emotions in a large group setting, allowing for the discussion of everyone's perceptions could allow the conflict to rise to the surface and therefore begin to be handled according to more traditional conflict management strategies. Bartunek, et al. (1992) found this to be especially important when approaching conflicts related to issues of diversity because continually allowing these conflicts to exist beneath the surface, will not allow true change to occur.

In this situation, one of the most detrimental elements facing the organization was everyone ignoring the hidden conflict behaviors they witnessed. Although most people are likely to be unaware of hidden conflict as such, those involved knew that there were secret behaviors being utilized by organizational members as a way to express disagreement and disapproval with other individuals. By ignoring these behaviors, they seemingly approved of them, which resulted in a growing prevalence and severity of these issues. Had these behaviors been addressed earlier in the change process by bringing the conflicts to the surface, it is possible that the change could have been completed more successfully and the organization could have functioned more efficiently.

This study focused on one conflict perspective – hidden expressions. However, researches have noted the importance of reducing one of the existing polarizations in the study of conflict – hidden versus public (Bartunek, et al., 1992). They instead advocate research that develops understanding of conflict in general, divorced from stark binaries.



This research continued the history of studying conflict from one polarized perspective. Hopefully, it can be used to further the research of general conflict.

The implications of this study indicate that hidden conflict can have an impact on the organizational change process. Therefore, it should be treated not as a nuisance or as expressions of immaturity. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the organizational members recognized problems between individuals, but did not feel that it was an issue pertinent to the organization – unfortunately, an incorrect assumption. Realizing that secret interpersonal or intergroup conflicts can have an impact on an organizational change and an organization as a whole should inspire organizational members to vigilantly watch for similar situations and try to prevent them from leading to the same result experienced in this case study.

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## APPENDIX A

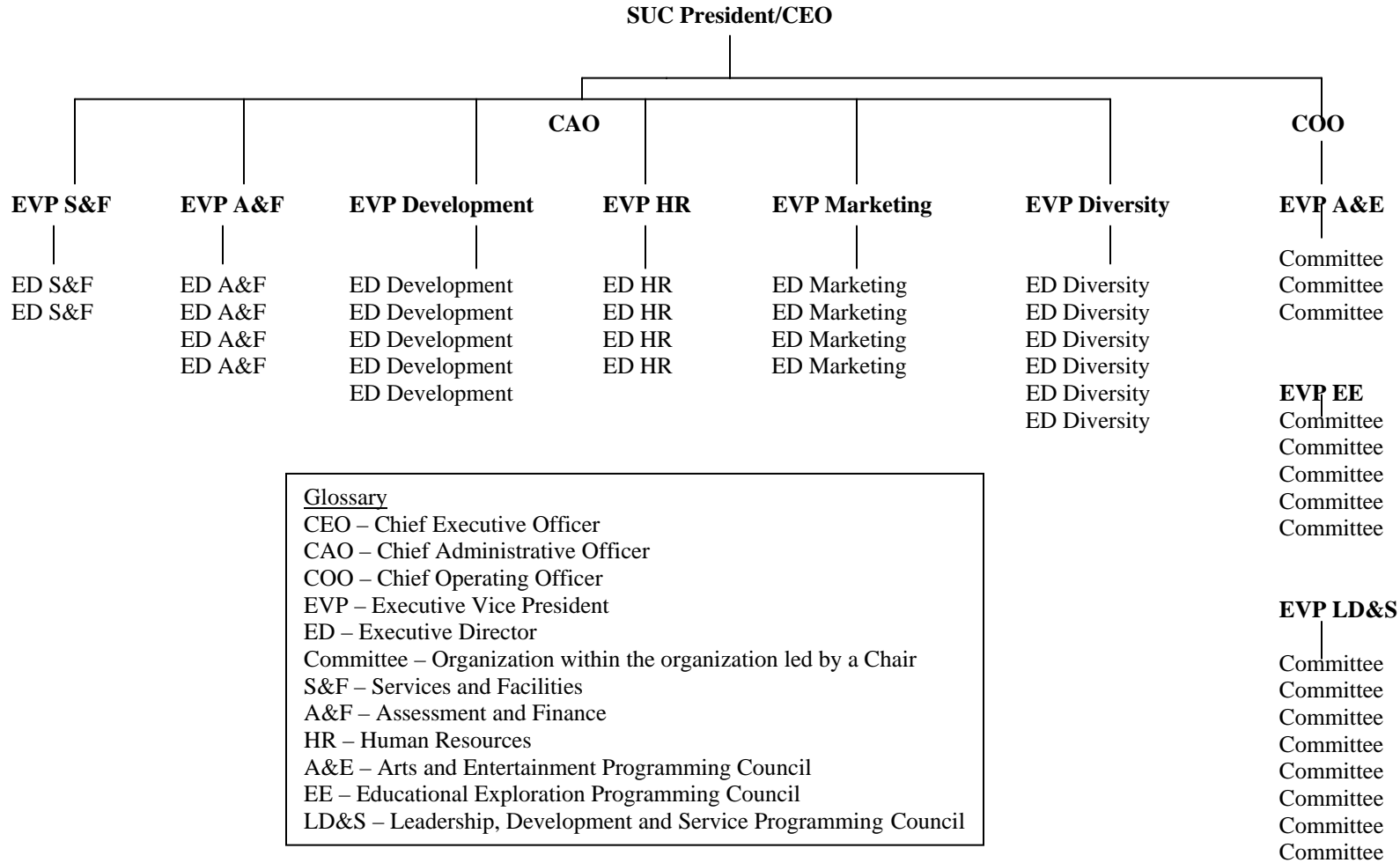


Figure A.1: SUC Student Organizational Chart

**APPENDIX B****RECRUITMENT E-MAIL**

Hi [Name],

I hope you are doing well! I am in the process of conducting research for my master's thesis looking at issues of organizational change as they occurred in the SUC during the last school year. The primary focus is the constitutional changes that resulted in the addition of the new Board of Directors.

As part of my research I would very much like to discuss your recollections and perspective of this event during an interview. All information collected will be kept anonymous. I realize you are undoubtedly very busy and would not want to take any more time than is necessary, but would greatly appreciate any insight you could give. Therefore, would you be available for an interview sometime soon? I would be happy to work around your schedule for the interview which should take no longer than an hour. Additionally, if you were to have any e-mails, memos, notes or other written documentation of the change process that you would be willing to share, I would greatly appreciate being able to look at it and possibly copy it for the research.

Again, any assistance you could offer would be very helpful. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,  
Jennifer Siepel  
jennifersiepel@\*\*\*\*.edu  
\*\*\*\_\*\*\*\_\*\*\*\*

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How would describe the Student Union Center? What is its purpose? How is it structured?
2. What is/was your position in the SUC? What were your responsibilities?
3. What kinds of changes took place in the SUC during the 2006-2007 that you witnessed?
4. How were these changes presented? Discussed? Implemented?
5. What was your role in this process? Everyone else? How was this related to one's position in the organizational structure?
6. How were issues approached and subsequent decisions made?
7. Were there any external factors that influenced the decision making process?

Positive responses:

You feel the process went smoothly? Why?

Do you feel others felt the same way?

Negative responses:

What makes you feel that way?

Was there anything in particular that influenced your perception of the process?

How did you approach the situation?

How do you feel others approached the situation?

**APPENDIX D****LIST OF WRITTEN ARTIFACTS****Council Meeting Minutes**

- April 10, 2006
- April 24, 2006
- June 24, 2006
- August 28, 2006
- September 11, 2006
- February 12, 2007
- February 26, 2007
- March 22, 2007

**Constitution Drafts**

- August 28, 2006
- August 31, 2006
- September 1, 2006
- November 20, 2006

**PowerPoint Presentation Explaining Change**

- Two drafts
- Final Presentation

**Professional E-mails**

32 from the President, CAO, CEO, Director and Associate Director of the SUC

**Personal E-mails**

44 from the President, CAO and CEO of the SUC

## APPENDIX E

Table E.1: Example of Data Analysis Chart

Time/Events →	Before change	Introduction of change	Problems with change	After change approved
Kind/Type of H.C. ↓				
Gossip	C: most of the discussion took place outside of the meetings just because talking with individual people, talking with individual staff, however in terms of meetings that accomplished things that pushed things forward and made decisions those were generally debated in the groups during our meetings			
Questioning		G: towards the officer team it just seemed like sometimes they'd just start questioning a lot		

		<p>more things you wouldn't normally question because they felt like they weren't involved in any way. I perceived it as defiance and it was maybe even like a lack of confidence in the officer team in some respect</p>		
Coalition building		<p>A: tried to talk to some of the key opinion leaders to try to let them know that nothing would be harmed and, if anything, it would be giving us more authority and responsibility, yeah staff and students...I guess I saw what I'd call factions getting together</p>		
Bitching		<p>P: somebody might know that I felt this way and come talk to me and say 'I totally agree with you. This is crap.'</p>		

Humor			<p>G: Yeah (chuckle) all the time, especially in the second semester it seemed like that was the common theme. I mean, it'd be jokes being made about lack of e-mails or lack of communication. I feel like the president definitely became the butt of the jokes quite often. It's not saying he didn't do a great job in making change, he made the first step but it's just the way he went about it people did not respect...I think originally it was anger but then it became a joke. It reached the point where, I mean, they couldn't do anything about it, so they might as well joke about it.</p>	
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Alienation			O: because I was probably a little less involved that some other folks were too, or at least less emotionally involved haha. I did my own thing and was concerned during meetings and would pay attention to what was going on	
Surveillance				
Avoidance			M: wouldn't make eye contact with me either. For a couple of weeks we'd pass each other in the hall and be like, yeah, good morning. It was a good morning til I saw you (laugh). So, I mean we'd gone from talking and having an easy relationship to like, when you pass somebody you can tell there's a strain there on both sides I	



			mean just by body language	
Withdrawal				N: I don't know what the timing exactly was in terms of why we had to do it and I honestly don't even care any more why it happened, but I really think later on, down the line, they're going to suffer repercussions for it because it's just a mess
Ambivalence				M: A lot of times when you start to talk about an issue you can always see the people sitting at the end of the table making comments to the person sitting next to them as I'm laying out what the decision making process has been. And that's fine, I never asked for complete and total silence or anything like that (chuckle) but you can recognize that

				<p>whenever there's someone making a comment that they don't want to make loud enough for everybody to hear there's some kind of underlying issue there and so I started to see more and more of that with a couple of people, um, and tried to address that with them on a personal level, especially as it tended to get worse and worse</p>
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**VITA**

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