

## ABSTRACT

Employee Sensemaking Following an Organizational Change:  
A Case Study on the Role of Identification, Framing, and Dissent

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This research explored how identification, framing, and dissent influenced employee sensemaking following an organizational change implementation. Retrospective narrative interviews were conducted with 20 individuals who experienced a departmental restructure within a franchise holding company. The data was coded and analyzed using paradigmatic narrative analysis, a form of grounded theory. Results revealed participants demonstrated four types of sensemaking processes referred to as lone wolf, soldier, evangelist, and voyeur. Future research should consider a more complex understanding of the employee experience following organizational change with the intent to reduce employee burnout and intent to leave.

*Keywords: Organizational change, sensemaking, organizational identification, role identification, framing, dissent, communication*

Employee Sensemaking Following an Organizational Change:  
A Case Study on the Role of Identification, Framing, and Dissent by

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Organizational change implementation is an ongoing process that includes many stakeholder experiences like layoffs, internal restructures, and mergers and acquisitions (Lewis & Seibold, 1993). For this study's purposes, organizational change is defined as modifications planned and implemented by an employer that significantly affect job responsibilities or skill sets for a group of employees (e.g., department). As Lewis (1999) explained, the impact of such change initiatives on stakeholders can be significant:

...a single planned change often gives rise to a high degree of discontinuity and disruption in organizational work methods, relationships, and roles. Planned change appears to involve much more than the presence of new procedures, ideas, people, and machinery. Planned change also often involves new organizational structures, new rules, new roles, new values, new rewards, and new ways of doing work. And for some, it means being relocated, reorganized, or released from the organization. (p. 67)

When stakeholders face organizational change, sensemaking is triggered. Sensemaking is the process by which people attribute meaning to their experiences, in order to better understand them and, ultimately, to enact behaviors (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). An organizational stakeholder's self-understanding or identity helps determine how he or she will make sense of events like organizational change, and sensemaking theory suggests that stakeholders experience and make sense of change in ways that fit with their self-identifications (Weick et al., 2005). Likewise, organizational changes such as being relocated, reorganized, or released from an organization can affect how individuals not only view their careers, but also their identities. When employees are highly identified with their employing organization or their role within the organization,

they may struggle to identify with new positions or tasks following a change. In order to better understand how stakeholders make sense of change, this study will explore employees' experiences with a departmental restructure, focusing specifically on how the employees made sense of the change and reidentified with their new roles.

When people make sense of a situation, they often frame their communication and understandings based on preexisting paradigms, which are also known as frames. In other words, employees use their previous experience and knowledge to form judgments about new events and experiences. From a social constructionist perspective, frames are co-constructed communication tools people use to guide their understandings of social interactions; so not only are understandings based on personal experiences, they're based on the shared experiences of others (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Framing is inextricably linked to the sensemaking process, as people borrow from frames to make sense of and create plausible interpretations of situations. How stakeholders and, specifically, employees make sense of an organizational change enactment can influence an organization's employee retention and future recruitment efforts (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1999). Thus, understanding the implications of organizational change on those affected, how employees make sense of organizational change, and ultimately, how they enact a response can help organizations better understand and serve their employees to increase job satisfaction and reduce turnover.

Response to change, also referred to as dissent, shapes and is shaped by sensemaking (Garner, 2013). Understanding the type of dissent enacted and to whom dissent was expressed can provide insight into employee sensemaking. Dissent can be expressed to peers (lateral) or supervisors (upward), thus placing importance on the type



of dissent enacted. In addition, the effect and impact of colleague input and attitude on dissent should be taken into account, given that supervisor and co-worker relationships have the strongest association with intent to leave (Scott, et al., 1999). Understanding an employee's dissent concerning change sheds light on to an employee's understanding or perception of a change.

By using rich, qualitative data, studying how employees understand change and dissent expression can provide insight into the sensemaking process of employees, their subsequent perceptions of an effective or ineffective change initiative, and their turnover intentions. Little extant literature exists that pursues an increased understanding of the sensemaking process of employees regarding an organizational change, despite the prevalence of changes affecting organizations around the world. More specifically, the complexity of the sensemaking process and how additional factors like identification, framing, and dissent are relevant and inextricably linked to evaluating employees' sensemaking of an organizational change.

For this study, interviews were conducted with former and current employees of a franchise holding company located in the Southwestern U.S. that experienced an organizational change implementation. This organizational case study of employee sensemaking, although not replicable, is transferable to other organizations' stakeholder experiences. This methodology allowed for a contextualized understanding of stakeholder sensemaking processes and the relationship to identity and dissent expression. In effect, this study provides further insight into organizational change planning and implementation, as it relates to how employees made sense of an organizational change,

how employees identified themselves during a change, and ultimately, how dissent shaped employee perception of the change.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

Communication is critical to organizational buy-in from stakeholders, particularly when discussing planned change. Evaluating employee perceptions before, during, and after planned change and adjusting enacted changes accordingly may help organizational changes be perceived as more effective. Lewis (2007) discussed how key factors like need for achievement, role ambiguity, and organizational identification influenced a change implementer's strategy and, ultimately, the stakeholder perceptions, concerns, and interactions. By taking stakeholders' perspectives and insights into account, implementers may be able to better influence stakeholders' impressions of an organizational change. Additionally, different stakeholders, depending on a variety of factors including role within an organization, social spheres, personal experiences, and other factors, have different perceptions of a change (Gallivan, 2001).

This chapter explores extant literature that shapes understanding of how employees make sense of organizational change initiatives with the goal of providing insight into employee perception of change. First, this chapter introduces the concept of sensemaking and how stakeholders, and in particular employees, are able to make sense of a change initiative, and how identification and enacted frames may influence that process. Lastly, this chapter unfolds how change can trigger dissent among employees, and how dissent shapes the sensemaking process, as well.

### *Sensemaking*

Sensemaking, the process through which people in a social context “extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively” of experiences and circumstances, is complex and affected by many factors (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). How people make sense of experiences, in this case, an organizational change, can be impacted by their views of themselves (e.g., identification) and which paradigms (e.g., frames) they call upon for making sense of situations. Sensemaking is about bracketing or framing new occurrences by drawing on past experiences for explanation. This section will explore how identification and framing play a role in employee sensemaking following an organizational change.

### *Identification*

The sensemaking process consists of seven characteristics, which includes identity and enactment (Weick et al., 2005). Identity is integral to sensemaking in that it informs one’s perception of events and ultimate action. Identities, whether it is organizational identity, role identity, or another identity, are the filters through which people make their explanations plausible. Making sense of an occurrence takes place retrospectively, so individuals process experiences through mutual enactment after the event itself. Through the communicative process of sensemaking, groups and, ultimately, departments within an organization share understandings of an organization and the change it enacts. Thus, an employee’s work identity, and the meaning he or she derives from their work, is socially constructed.

Weick et al. (2005) claimed meaning is co-constructed to “inform and constrain identity and action” through shared experiences (p. 409). Identity affects not only how

employees view themselves, but also how they fit a role within an organization. Many stakeholders may carry past experiences and their self-perception to their new positions, and those experiences form identities from which employees draw to form plausible conclusions (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Weick et al. (2005) suggested, “who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity” (p. 416). The Scott, Corman, & Cheney (1998) structural theory of identification suggested people have different overlapping identities they use in different settings. For example, a person may have a student identity, work identity, and family identity that they refer to in different situations. Multiple individual identity regions of importance can be impacted by large organizational change, including group, organizational, role, and occupational (Poole & McPhee, 2005). In the case of organizational change, employees often are forced to assimilate into a new environment (Waldeck & Myers, 2007).

Reidentification, the disassociation with an identity and subsequent adoption of a new identity, can affect employees significantly. Identification and reidentification during or after a change is relevant to an organizations’ efforts to better understand employee sensemaking, since high organizational identification is linked with reduced intentions to leave (Scott et al., 1999). Additionally, Scott et al. (1999) claimed adequate communication in an organization reduces uncertainty and adds a sense of job stability. Dent and Goldberg (1999) suggested stakeholders don’t resist change itself, but the uncertainty associated with it. Uncertainty reduction theory proposed people who are experiencing uncertainty would seek information to overcome uncertainty (Berger &

Calabrese, 1975). At that point, any relevant information, whether formal, informal, accurate, or inaccurate would be curated to limit negative affect caused by uncertainty. Therefore, sensemaking is not solely based on facts, but rather, a person's plausible perceptions of experiences (Weick et al., 2005). Thus, despite its co-constructed nature, groups make sense of situations differently because of their individual identities and frames, which are addressed in turn.

### *Framing*

Making sense of an event like an organizational change involves categorizing or bracketing events into themes or frames that seem plausible to those who are engaged in sensemaking. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) asserted that framing is comprised of three components: *language*, *thought*, and *forethought*. As explained by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), language allows people to interpret situations with others; the element of thought provides a way to reflect on personal and others' interpretations of experiences; and *forethought* provides a framework to predict or prepare for interpretation of future occurrences. Through this conceptualization, framing allows people to have a schema to more easily interpret their surroundings and experiences. Additionally, this permitted people to co-construct meaning and adjust communication according to those who are interacting (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

Analyzing how employees categorized and understood an event provides insight into how employees made sense of change. The study of employee framing tactics may help other organizations implement change and minimize negative outcomes like burnout and turnover following a change implementation. As an added element, employers, in addition to employees, frame their messaging. Framing of an organizational change from

implementers to stakeholders can also influence employee perception of a change implementation.

The frames to which people revert can often be ascribed to the group or organization with which he or she identifies. For example, some framing research like Weick's (1993) analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster explores how frames can be constructed and leveraged by groups to define and understand particular experiences. As situations evolve, the shift to different frames of reference becomes important for individuals and organizations alike, as exhibited in Weick's (1993) interpretation of the disaster. If individuals and organizations shift to different frames of reference depending on the circumstances, as Weick (1993) stated, then theoretically, framing allows for people to adjust their communication tactics based on individuals and circumstances. Therefore, framing defined as a co-construction allows the inclusion of more strategic communication tactics in its definition, since a person could theoretically adjust his or her communication tactics and understandings based on with whom he or she is communicating. According to this paradigm, framing entails not only strategic communication by the organizational leaders, but it also allows for stakeholders' abilities to dispute frames (Liu, 2010). In response to the assumption of organization-created frame repertoires, Liu (2010) suggested stakeholders, as well as leaders, can negotiate and reframe messages despite a framing device's intended usage. Beyond the articles listed above, there is little extant literature on framing in change implementation efforts.

In addition to strategic frame selection, the co-constructive nature of sensemaking also can affect the maintenance and performance of a new organizational structure. Lewis and Seibold (1993) proposed social influence in organizations influences fidelity and

uniformity in the effects of an organizational change. Fidelity refers to whether or not the design of the change and its actual enactment are maintained. Uniformity refers to the similarity of the performance of the proposed change across different stakeholders. If those are not consistent, additional change will most likely occur. Stakeholder perceptions of uncertainty, fidelity, and uniformity following organizational change enactment affects job satisfaction and intent to leave.

The significance of employees making sense of their work environment, particularly following an organizational change implementation, leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways did employees make sense of the organizational change?

RQ2: In what ways did employee identities influence sensemaking about the change?

RQ3: In what ways did employees' framing of the organizational change influence their sensemaking of it?

Employee sensemaking after an organizational change may be impacted by employee identification and framing. Enacted responses, or dissent, shape and is shaped by an employee's sensemaking and subsequent perception of a change.

### *Dissent*

Because a person's sensemaking process can be complex, there may be additional influences on an employee's sensemaking beyond identification and framing. Dissent is amongst the potential influences on employee sensemaking. Analyzing employee dissent concerning change allows for better understanding of how employees make sense of an organizational change through their actions. Organizational dissent, in the form of expressing feedback to others about an organizational change, is not just



negative, despite its negative connotation. In fact, Garner (2009b) found the primary goals of dissenters at work are advice requests and information requests, while secondary goals are related to identification and conversation management (i.e., enacted frames). Therefore, dissent is an expression used as a way to self-identify and manage conversation through frames, ultimately, to make sense of an organization. Avtgis, Thomas-Maddox, Taylor, and Patterson (2007) found that American employees who reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, feelings of failure, and isolation from colleagues reported low levels of articulated dissent and avoided using latent dissent. According to the study, when employees experienced the three symptoms of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment), the employees became apathetic and unlikely to dissent. Therefore, a lack of dissent is indicative of an unhappy workforce and signifies a disconnection in a person's organizational identification and apathy for controlling frame enactment. In fact, employees who are highly identified with an organization are more attuned to organizational problems, thus compelling them to dissent more often (Garner, 2012). As Kassing (1997) said,

Empowered employees may engage in more dissent, but the type of organizational culture they work within probably determines the strategies employees use to express dissent. Organizations that empower their employees by providing opportunities for them to express their opinions may receive more articulated dissent. Organizations that empower their employees by increasing the amount and number of tasks with which employees are involved, but do little to solicit employees' opinion concerning their involvement, may witness more antagonistic or displaced dissent. (p. 329)

Dissent doesn't happen in a vacuum. In the context of planned change, attention must be paid to all those affected by it and those (e.g., co-workers, friends, even family) who are participants in the sensemaking process (Garner, 2013). Thus, two types of dissent, lateral

and upward, must be considered. Nonetheless, most dissent research looks at upward dissent (i.e., dissent to one's superiors), which is often discouraged by organizations. Lateral indicates dissent to colleagues, family, and peers, whereas upward dissent indicates feedback given to those in a more supervisory role like managers and supervisors. Examining the form of dissent enacted and the intended audience for enacted dissent can provide insight into the intentions of the dissenter.

Before improvements can be made, Lewis and Seibold (1996) suggest management should acknowledge that negative feedback following a large change isn't necessarily an "attitude problem," which is often attributed to outspoken stakeholders and employees. Uncertainty in a job and a lack of norms affect how favorably stakeholders react to change within organizations, as it can also affect their identification with the organizations and their roles (Lewis & Seibold, 1996). Actions and acceptance of dissent do not necessarily need to be just—they simply must be perceived as such (Lee, 2001). According to Lee (2001), employees who perceived cooperative communication with their work groups perceived more distributive and procedural justice. Garner's (2009b) findings suggested dissenter perceived success (of dissent) should be taken into account when looking at dissent effectiveness. The perception of being listened to, even if additional changes aren't enacted, can affect job satisfaction. According to Lewis and Seibold (1996), performance, normative influence, and uncertainty affected stakeholder coping responses considerably more than a stakeholder's liking or disliking (e.g., attitude) for a change. In short, by understanding the role of dissent in an employee's sensemaking of a change, organizations may be able to adapt communication tactics and feedback solicitation to influence employee perceptions of change.

Feedback, whether considered positive or negative (e.g., resistance), is a healthy form of self-monitoring for an organization (Nevis, 1987). By allowing and promoting dissent to supervisors and the entire department, small, effective changes (when necessary) can be made before employee job satisfaction reaches such lows that inspire burnout and intent to leave (Scott et al., 1999). This study delved into how employees who experienced an organizational change enacted dissent as a response to the uncertainty of the change implementation. This introduces the fourth research question, which is:

RQ4: To what extent did employee sensemaking of the change shape or become shaped by employee dissent?

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

#### *Research Context*

This case study focused on current and former employees involved in an internal organizational change at DSC. DSC, a pseudonym, is an international franchise holding company housing multiple franchise brands that is located in the Southwestern U.S. DSC employs approximately 400 corporate workers. In this case, the organizational change entailed an internal restructuring of the marketing department that directly affected approximately 40 employees. A case study methodology allows in-depth analysis of the affected employees' sensemaking strategies during and following the specific change event. Focusing on one organizational change allowed for greater understanding of the employee sensemaking processes expressed, since DSC employees adhered to the same company policies and practices. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of these factors and how context shaped the sensemaking process. Additionally, the accessibility of the organization and the timeliness of the organizational change, which occurred approximately three years before data collection began, provided an opportunity to do an in-depth analysis with access to those employees affected by the change.

DSC, a family business, was established in the early 1980s with one franchise. Many family members remain involved in the organization's operations. The organization adheres to a values-driven mission, to the extent that values are recited daily. Each of the franchise brands operates as a singular company within the umbrella company with separate presidents, vice presidents, and support staff. Preceding the

change, each franchise brand within the organization had designated marketing and public relations professionals to promote an individual brand (not DSC as a whole). The marketing department included four areas: marketing, public relations, administration, and creative.

Several months prior to the change, members of the executive team announced the restructuring and cited streamlining employees' efforts and eliminating redundancy as the rationale. The organizational change was implemented without the inclusion and oversight of outside consultants. In addition to the existing four areas within the department, a fifth area was created to handle online marketing, expanding the department to include 46 positions in those five areas. Rather than performing multiple tasks for an individual brand, employees were moved into task-specific areas to perform one task for the multiple franchise brands. At the time of the change, the department relocated to a building several blocks away from the organization's primary campus.

Despite their value-driven environment and family business orientation, the change resulted in high departmental turnover. Within a year of the restructuring, the turnover rate was more than 52 percent, and in some cases, the same position was filled and vacated multiple times. Since the time of the initial change, the department has undergone multiple additional departmental restructure events. A significant amount of turnover has continued since that time, despite an influx of new employees who filled the vacated positions. Twenty-four employees out of the 46-person department left the year the change was implemented.

### *Process and Participants*

Each participant must have been an employee in the marketing department at DSC during the organizational change or soon after. His or her job must have been directly affected by the change. Participants were selected through network sampling via email, and the social media sites Facebook and LinkedIn. From the initial network sample, a snowball sample was used until reaching data saturation, the point where participant interviews no longer provide additional insight into the subject (Tracy, 2013), and potential participants became unresponsive. The number of interviews needed for data saturation is dependent upon how many interviews it takes to “provide for and substantiate meaningful and significant claims,” and find it pedagogically valuable (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). I contacted 37 potential participants; three refused. Twenty participants were interviewed and included in this study. Approximately 43 percent of the department at the time of the initial restructure is represented. Each of the five sub-departments within the marketing department is represented by at least two people. Three individuals in leadership positions were included. The ages of those interviewed range from 24 to 52 years old, with an average age of 32.9 years old. Seven participants claimed their position in the department was their first job out of college. The participants’ employment period at DSC ranged from nine months to 12 years. On average, the participants were employed at DSC for five years. Of those interviewed, seven participants are still employed at DSC.

Participants received a letter with information on the research project and its purpose. In addition, participants received information on the expectations of his or her role in the interview and research project, as well as a consent form. Once a potential

participant agreed, a face-to-face or phone interview was scheduled. All in-person interviews were executed according to the participant's schedule and location preference. All interviews were audio-recorded pending participant consent.

### *Author Positionality*

As a former employee in the marketing department at DSC, my experience at the organization during the organizational change inclined my interest in pursuing this research. I was hired at the organization for one of the franchise brands as their public relations professional two years prior to the organizational change, and I exited the organization less than a year after the change was enacted. For the first two years, I performed many communication and public relations-related tasks for one franchise brand with significant direct franchisee contact. Following the organizational change, my role was reassigned to strictly media relations for all of the franchise brands with minimal direct franchisee contact – a significant and disruptive shift from my previous work activities. From a social constructionist paradigm, the autoethnographic nature of the research will allow rigorous understanding of the data due to my understanding of the organization, while acknowledging potential biases it may cause in the research. My intention is to create transparency “with my biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research,” despite my tacit knowledge of the organization (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). My tacit knowledge provides context into the organizational change and its effects on employees.

Many communication scholars have backed the benefits of an autoethnographic perspective. Ethnographic researchers study patterns of communication and the meanings of those patterns (Tracy, 2013). For example, by immersing herself in an ethnographic

study of cruise ship communication patterns, Tracy (2000) was able to provide unique insight into cruise employee culture and the emotional labor of the position. While DSC has continued to undergo change while I have not been an employee, I shared the experience of the change implementation and the resulting sensemaking. In addition, my inclusion in the organization at the time of the change enactment provides me with an extensive network of relationships to those employees affected by the change.

### *Data Collection*

To better understand the sensemaking of the DSC employees, participants were asked to tell stories of their experiences. Narratives of personal experience are a universal form of human communication (Nelson, 1989). Reissman (1993) claimed, “individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives” (p. 2). Telling stories not only explicates actions, but it also imbues meaning into a person’s experiences. By analyzing narratives as data, researchers are able to better understand how participants make sense of situations (Reissman, 1993). Because of the use of narratives in the identification and sensemaking process, retrospective narrative interviews were conducted for this study. Since sensemaking is an ongoing process (Weick, 1993), the participants’ insights into the organizational change continue to shift three years after the initial change. The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were asked to report demographic information before being asked to recall experiences during and after the DSC marketing department organizational change. Interviews were performed to saturation.



### *Data Analysis*

By using paradigmatic narrative analysis, themes inductively emerged from the stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). Paradigmatic narrative analysis is the study of narrative accounts through the themes that emerge from a person's storytelling. It takes into account story structure, meaning, and context. Narrative analysis requires a more open-ended approach to the interview process with limited interruptions by the researcher conducting the interview (Bell, 1988). This form of grounded theory allows for qualitative data to generate ideas and categories based on data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and stored in a secure, password-protected location. The interviews yielded nearly 12 hours of audio-recorded data that was transcribed. To further ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym. The data was analyzed using the paradigmatic narrative analysis.

After the interviews were transcribed, I coded participant answers and recurring codes into themes. I underwent multiple rounds of rigorous coding, while referencing extant literature and writing memos concurrently (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Writing memos allowed for researcher self-reflexivity, which is particularly relevant in an ethnographic study. The data was analyzed using inductive techniques with the exception of dissent analysis. Dissent was coded using an etic approach, utilizing existing descriptive dissent categorizations from Avtgis et al. (2007) and Garner (2013), which included upward, lateral, articulated, and latent dissent categorizations. The units of analysis were determined by natural participant topic shifts in conversation. The data was coded for themes, identification, framing, and dissent expression.

Primary-cycle coding for RQ1 yielded 44 primary codes. In second-level coding, the first-cycle, thematic codes were reduced to seven key, substantive themes. Those themes include: *perceptions of value* (feeling valued or not valued in the workplace), *power struggles* (concerns with control or loss of control), *attribution of blame* (assigning culpability to others or events), *personal resilience* (recollections of personal triumphs), *positivity amidst change* (notable, favorable occurrences), *culture/environment* (acknowledgement of a negative atmosphere), and *information sharing* (fact-based stories intended to educate). Multiple levels of relevant identification were uncovered including role and organizational identification (RQ2). Data was coded for *high* or *low* role identification. Multiple forms of organizational identification emerged at different levels within the organization. Organizational identification was coded based on high or low identification with the *department*, *sub-department*, *franchise brand*, or *company*. The emergence of framing categories based on use of voice was emic (RQ3). I noticed some participants were noticeably uncomfortable with first person usage, while others significantly relied upon second-person inclusive voice. Therefore, framing strategies were analyzed by use of voice in storytelling. Since “narrativization assumes point of view,” the interpretive use of voice analysis is useful in narrative analysis (Reissman, 1993, p. 64). The data was coded for *first person voice*, *second-person inclusive voice* (use of “we” and other inclusive language), an “*us versus them*” orientation, and *third person voice*. “Narratives are laced with social discourses and power relations,” and as such, the participant narratives expressed take into account a person’s discourse and language choice regarding others (Reissman, 1993, p. 65). Dissent was evaluated as *upward* or *lateral*, and *articulated* or *latent* (RQ4).

Next, I interpreted and analyzed the emergent codes and identified relationships within the data across all participants. Four participant sensemaking types emerged from this cross-section of data. Member checks were conducted with three participants following the analysis to ensure an accurate representation. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, member checks allow the researcher to verify interpretations and conclusions with participants to further increase study credibility. The three participants confirmed the four types, which are presented in the “Findings” chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

#### *Introduction*

This chapter offers an interpretation of the research questions and the data. It addresses how the participants made sense of the change, and how their identities and framing of the change influenced their sensemaking. Additionally, this chapter examines the extent to which participant dissent was shaped by or shaped sensemaking of the change. The ways participants made sense of the departmental restructure, with an emphasis on the research questions, emerged inductively. The four emergent types are based on how the 20 participants attributed meaning to their experiences of the organizational change. Using examples and excerpts from the interviews, different aspects of the types are showcased and explained. These types do not represent individuals, but rather sensemaking processes. Thus, participants often demonstrated multiple sensemaking processes throughout the organizational transition. These emergent processes are labeled *lone wolf*, *soldier*, *evangelist*, and *voyeur*.

The data was coded with the intent to better understand how participants made sense of the change, taking into account role and organizational identification, participant framing of the change, and the expression of dissent. The ways in which participants made sense of the organizational change are grounded in those four areas, and all of those areas will be addressed within each type. In addition to the four emergent sensemaking processes, overall structure and time concerns were observed across all types. This will be addressed in the next section.

### *Structure and Recollection of Time*

There were two unifying factors across all four types, including the applied narrative structure of participants and how participants remembered the timeline of events. Reissman (1993) suggested looking into the structure of the narrative in addition to the content to allow for a more robust interpretation. When I did so, it became clear participants often led with impersonally reported information before delving into more personal stories and recollections. This impersonal sharing of information lacked opinions and acted as a chronological explanation of the enacted organizational change. This is a manifestation of an emotional or psychological distancing from the change, since all 20 participants expressed negativity or shared difficulties associated with the departmental restructure. For example, Kevin said, “big picture-wise, it just feels negative in the air,” about the departmental atmosphere following the change implementation. Chronological, neutral information-sharing about the organizational setup preempted most judgments on the aftermath of the change occurrence. This narrative structure expression allowed participants to feel comfortable and ease into revisiting the difficult experience.

Additionally, when remembering timelines of events, many participants overestimated when the change occurred and how long they remained employed at DSC following the initial departmental restructure. For example, Ryan estimated the initial departmental restructure occurred, “I can’t remember the exact year, but it was, yeah, it was close to four or five years ago,” when in fact, it occurred three years ago. Another participant, Emily, estimated she worked at DSC for one year after the restructure, whereas in actuality, she left less than six months after the change was enacted. In

tandem with the impersonal report of information, the misremembered timelines suggest a mental separation from the organizational change experience. In making sense of the uncertainty of the change, participants lengthened their experience in the new organizational structure, and as a result, imbued the restructure with additional significance in their recollections. This phenomenon was demonstrated when Madison claimed:

It feels like it was five years of hell. And really, it was only like a year and a half, two years, you know. It wasn't that long, but oh my God, I feel like it was so long.

With these observations on participants' storytelling styles and their relationships to time in mind, the four types of participant sensemaking are included below (See Table 1).

#### *Lone Wolf*

As suggested in the type name, lone wolf sensemaking was singular-oriented and those participants demonstrating this sensemaking process primarily were concerned with themselves during the change. Many participants have narratives in the lone wolf type, yet few demonstrated this sensemaking process for the totality of their DSC change experience. This sensemaking perspective did not identify with larger groups, whether it was the department, the sub-department, or the company. For example, Tiffany explained her ambivalence toward the organization and lack of identification on multiple levels:

So I didn't identify with the brands or the company or anything like that because I didn't really get any of that brainwashing stuff, but I also didn't really feel like I identified with anyone on the team either... When I was at [DSC], I didn't really feel like I belonged there. I wasn't attached to anything.

TABLE 1: TYPOLOGY

Type	Theme(s)	Identification	Frame	Dissent
Lone Wolf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attributions of blame</li> <li>• Culture/environment</li> <li>• Personal resilience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role identification depends on intent to leave (e.g. low when intending to exit)</li> <li>• Low department</li> <li>• High brand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upward-articulated</li> <li>• Lateral-latent and lateral-articulated</li> </ul>
Soldier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attributions of blame</li> <li>• Personal resilience</li> <li>• Perceptions of value</li> <li>• Power struggle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low role</li> <li>• High sub-department</li> <li>• Low department</li> <li>• High brand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Us versus them”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All forms (upward-articulated, upward-latent, lateral-articulated, lateral-latent)</li> </ul>
Evangelist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of value</li> <li>• Positivity amidst change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low role</li> <li>• High department</li> <li>• High company</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Second person, inclusive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upward-articulated</li> <li>• Lateral-articulated, lateral-latent</li> </ul>
Voyeur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attributions of blame</li> <li>• Culture/environment</li> <li>• Personal resilience</li> <li>• Positivity amidst change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High role</li> <li>• Low department, sub-department, brand (all organization-level)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Third person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upward-articulated</li> <li>• Lateral-articulated</li> </ul>

Despite low organizational identification, this type showed high franchise brand identification. Unlike the other levels of organizational identification, high franchise brand identification was equated with commitment to franchisees. By focusing on franchisee support, those exemplifying lone wolf were able to fulfill a purpose without getting attached to the tumultuous change environment of the department. This type was notable for its internal drive and communicated themes of personal resiliency, such as personal pride, use of hardships as learning experiences, coping mechanisms, and a sense of purpose. Tiffany typified this in her complaints about the organizational structure:

I felt like I was the only one in my department that was actually getting stuff done. Everybody else would kind of deal with, 'Okay, well, I don't know what I'm supposed to do,' and stuff like that, and wouldn't take the initiative to actually just do something.

Because this type was very responsible, they enacted articulated dissent in an effort to change their circumstances. Most often, they articulated upward dissent, verbalized feedback to supervisors, since those in leadership positions were assumed to have the capability to enact additional change. However, those who resonated with lone wolf expressed dissent laterally to their peers, friends, and family in both latent (passive) and articulated forms, and prescribed to significant expressions of blame attribution. The attribution of blame theme was demarcated by participants' attempts to justify and rationalize the cause of negative change outcomes and finding a reason, whether valid or unfounded, for those negative characteristics. For example, Madison attributed her problems with the change to leader ignorance:

A lot of this could have been fixed. It didn't have to be as painful as it was, if [my supervisor] had just listened to the people on his team...



Lone wolf sensemaking often centered on the uncertainty and negativity of the department culture/environment following the change implementation. Unlike other types, individuals exhibiting the lone wolf sensemaking type were highly identified with his or her role until the point at which they expressed intent to leave. The interaction between franchise brand identification, role identification, and eventually, intent to leave was evident in Kayla's interview:

The only reason I did [feel guilty quitting] was because so many people had been leaving, and I felt kind of bad for the franchisees who had given, probably, their life savings to be a part of this franchise company, and that their support was probably failing during that time. But I had been so miserable for the past seven months that, at the end of the day, you have to look out for your health and your well being.

This rang true with their penchant for communicating themes of personal resilience. Additionally, the lone wolf type communicated perceptions of value, often expressing a sense of being undervalued or not respected in the workplace. In keeping with the personal focus, this type relied on first person voice. For example, Allison recalled her time working in a franchise brand and explained her sense of loss following the departmental restructure:

I still to this day think it's probably one of my favorite jobs I've ever had, the [franchise brand] side before it was moved for the restructure... the people I worked for just truly cared about me. They actually knew my story, except I've found that even hard now in the different jobs I've had, to find people that actually care about me. So yeah, I mean, I was just not cared about at all by my superiors in the new structure, and it felt like that intimacy was gone.

Allison explained her significant identification shift because of the change implementation as very personal. The lone wolf sensemaking process framed experience as solitary with personal struggles.

### *Soldier*

Several participants demonstrated the soldier sensemaking process. Unlike lone wolf sensemaking, soldier sensemaking was group-oriented. The most notable and striking trait of this type was the communication of power struggle and an “us versus them” framing device. The soldier sensemaking process centered on a battle mentality – explaining transition experiences as confrontational and combative with other groups at DSC. The power struggle was evident in references to politics, rumors, and perceived losses of control. For example, Emily explained her “us versus them” mentality:

And we knew we couldn't, as a communications team, really trust our marketing peers, even though we used to always confide in them before – in the old brands. It really was an environment of him against her, marketing versus PR, unfortunately.

The soldier type exhibited a high identification with either a franchise brand or a sub-department. For example, Allison explained her attachment to one of the franchise brands as an introduction into an explanation of a power struggle:

We were kind of treated more like we should be an agency, where we should kind of approach these kind of from a distance, the new franchisees, instead of getting to know them as family. It wasn't necessarily the change that bugged me. I understand change and everything has to change, and that's how everything grows. That's not really what bugged me. It was very obvious there was [sic] social politics.

Adversely, these participants who expressed the soldier sensemaking process had low departmental and corporate identification. Those representing soldier type were usually those who were employed in a brand and highly identified with that brand prior to the marketing department restructure. This group underwent a significant role and organizational identification shift. Sarah explained the shift of culture, and her eventual desire to leave the department because of the organizational change:

Prior to the change... I had no desire to be on the operational staff. Marketing was always seen as the place to be. It was fun. Everybody enjoyed it. That's where the creative juices flowed. Everything was amazing. And then after the change, and as the change started happening, marketing was the place that nobody wanted to be... So I moved over to the operational staff side.

Because of this significant shift in identification, this type viewed the change negatively and, ultimately, as a power struggle. With whom the participant had the power struggle wasn't consistent. It occurred between sub-departments, between leadership and employees, and operations (franchise brands) and the department. Essentially, those demonstrating the soldier type considered themselves part of a faction pushing back against the enacted change. They had low role identification. In fact, Emily attributed her negativity about the change to a loss of role identity, saying:

We had worked really well, regardless of what the structure was previously, because we knew what our roles were. But the new role, no one knew. Everybody's vying for job responsibilities to validate what our roles were.

Because soldier sensemaking concentrated on the perception of being in a struggle, those in this type utilized all forms of dissent: upward-articulated, upward-latent (passive acts of dissent to leadership), lateral-articulated, and lateral-latent. For example, Megan recalled significant amounts of lateral-articulated dissent:

There were people that I would talk to, and we would all be negative together... It was fire. We would all meet up with each other and get more and more angry. When you hear about someone else's frustrations or trials, then you're going to get angry for them, which is just going to fester...

Participants exhibiting soldier sensemaking were recognized by their pessimistic view of the department, their perceptions of value, and high use of blame attribution (particularly toward those in leadership positions). For example, Megan went on to say:

They needed the group to kind of break off, but there was a lot of resentment toward middle management for not being able to help their soldiers and go up into the upper management to fix things or, if it was a leadership issue, and they didn't

want to fix things. But there was definitely a lot of resentment toward middle management from in the trenches.

Because the soldier type perceived a battle being fought, participants demonstrating this type thought highly of themselves and the team with which they were highly identified. They voiced their personal resiliency often.

Another development, as exhibited in Megan's account, was the use of metaphors as descriptors of the organizational change. Megan compared her sub-department team members to. "...soldiers that are in the trenches with you," hence the type name. In fact, Megan used the term "soldiers" for herself and her peers throughout her interview in lieu of names or more descriptive word choices. On the other hand, Courtney illustratively described the change implementation as the "wild, wild west." The extended metaphor went on to compare details of the change throughout the interview. As she put it, the change was:

... the wild, wild west. It was literally every man for himself, guns blazing. Like, pew...pew...pew...like guns, and everybody was shooting everybody.

Courtney went on to compare the environment following the change as, "toxic," "like a powder keg," and "a cancer." The metaphors graphically insinuated the uncertainty that needed to be overcome in the sensemaking process and the difficulty of that process.

### *Evangelist*

Like soldier sensemaking, evangelist sensemaking was also group-oriented, but in most ways, the two types were opposites of one another. Evangelist sensemaking was most memorable for its inclusiveness. Participants exhibiting evangelist sensemaking used second-person inclusive voice a great deal. In fact, this type tended to be made up of

those in leadership positions who took ownership of the change and its enactment. For example, Matthew recalled the change planning process:

So let's make the changes. Let's do these big changes within the department, and it will work out from the building standpoint, if we move all these marketing people and communications people into one spot.

They were highly identified with the company and the department. Individuals demonstrating soldier sensemaking tended to be former brand employees, whereas those typifying evangelist sensemaking were less likely to have worked in a brand. They were usually either new hires or worked on the corporate level prior to the organizational change. Because of their inclusion in the departmental restructure planning and implementation, they had low role identification. Evangelist sensemaking was concerned with the organization and the change effectiveness more than individual job effectiveness. Participants expressing this type wanted the department to succeed, and if the department succeeded, they considered themselves successful. In fact, Matthew explained it well when he recalled the transition's problems and its purpose:

I kind of like to push the boundaries, and those boundaries tend to be instituting change in some way into an organization. And if that means I fall on my face once in a while, then so be it. At least I'm pushing. I'm not the kind of person that's like, just keep your head down and make sure you keep your job. I would rather lose my job.

The evangelist type exhibited a sense of purpose but was not immune to the trials and uncertainty prevalent in the department following the change implementation. For example, Ryan explained some of the setbacks in the changes to the department structure:

Now, there was some difficulty that came with understanding new processes and setting up new procedures in how we work in this changed environment... Trying to get seven companies to agree on the same [website] layout was difficult and a lengthy process, but it was more beneficial for us to go the route of all being under one umbrella.

Despite acknowledging difficulties of the change, they expressed positivity amidst change and were more likely to express positive expressions of value (e.g. feel more valued or treated fairly). Positivity amidst change could be expressed as recollections of good leadership, effective communication, or a belief in company goals or values. Gary recalled:

It was really easy for me to get to my boss. Her office was right there, so it was just a few steps away, so that was really great.

Because of their investment in the department and company, individuals demonstrating this type expressed upward-articulated dissent. For example, Matthew recollected conversations he had with his supervisor about issues with the change – ultimately leading to his organizational exit:

There was a lot of discussion with [Trevor] and I about what was next, and there was a lot of... um... there was a lot of discussion about the struggles with the change, the transition of the department, a lot of...kind of a lot that led up to me leaving, obviously.

Lateral-articulated and lateral-passive dissent also were relied upon for coping and making sense of the change. For example, Josh reported, “chat[ting] about it with [co-workers] at the time, as well as a couple of friends outside of work who were willing to listen to [him] rant on the topic.” Ultimately, evangelist sensemaking relied on dissent as a mechanism to improve the department with which they were highly identified.

### *Voyeur*

As soldier sensemaking offsets the evangelist, so voyeur sensemaking offsets the lone wolf. Voyeur was singular-oriented, but rather than being identified with a brand, participants demonstrating the voyeur sensemaking process weren't highly identified on any of the organizational levels. They considered themselves separate. For example,

Kevin said his goal during the transition was to “lay low, ride it out, do [his] work, and leave it at that.” The voyeur type is best described as an onlooker perspective. Those exhibiting this type used third person heavily and reported on the experience of others more than themselves. For example, Leah explained she didn’t consider herself significantly touched by the departmental restructure:

You know, in reality, [the changes] didn’t really affect me in a major way... So I wasn’t involved in all the stress that people had to endure when trying to figure out what their new roles were.

They had high role identification, and individuals exemplifying the voyeur type were the most likely to have stayed through the tumult of the organizational change. In fact, Julie explained her commitment to her role:

Again, being confident in the job that I’ve been doing and what I contribute into the company and how useful I am to the company, I think that has made me feel confident in keeping my position there.

Because they were concerned for themselves, voyeur sensemaking included personal resiliency through the change efforts. Those typifying voyeur were direct and only expressed articulated dissent, although it was both lateral and upward. Participants demonstrating the voyeur type refrained from passive dissent, since passive dissent is associated with more emotional reactions. They commented on the state of the department as they saw it, often communicating the state of the culture/environment in phrasing. For example, Kevin recalled the department culture following the change implementation:

I don’t like it out there in the air. It’s always kind of shocking to me when I hear people talking that way... I just don’t do that. I don’t play the political games. I really don’t care. It’s boring to me, frankly.

The voyeur type notably juxtaposed this negativity with positivity amidst change and personal resilience – noting what went poorly and what went well during the departmental restructure. As Leah described her experience, her position as a spectator was evident:

I know that a lot of marketing companies do set up marketing departments so that people focus on their strengths, really focus on that for the company, as opposed to having people who are in marketing who really know it all. I just feel that a decision was made to go this way, and then changes happened really quickly, and nobody had that time to wrap their head around who was now going to be responsible for what pieces.

Because of this tendency to view the situation as an outsider, participants demonstrating voyeur sensemaking were inclined to express criticism of others and reason their experience through attributions of blame. They assessed the situation based on their observations, which allowed for the assignment of responsibility, as well as provided more objective points of view.

### *Summary*

In comparing the cross-section of the four research questions within the data, the resulting typology indicates the influence of identity, framing, and dissent on the sensemaking process. The types of enacted participant sensemaking processes suggest the role of identification, framing, and dissent on employee sensemaking is integrative. In fact, this study intimates that researching the complex sensemaking of employees following an organizational change implementation is an appropriate pursuit of study.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

#### *Introduction*

This study offers insights into organizational change and how employees make sense of a change implementation. The research questions sought to explore not only how employees make sense of organizational change, but also how their identification, enacted frames and dissent influenced their sensemaking. Results indicated that despite their different roles before and after the change, participants collectively made sense of the organizational change in four ways. These distinct sensemaking processes, which are fully explained in the “Findings” chapter, were labeled lone wolf, soldier, evangelist, and voyeur. Considering this typology, this study attempts to categorize the sensemaking processes of employees who underwent a significant organizational transition, in an effort to better understand how employees perceive and adapt to change. This extends organizational change literature by focusing on how a change implementation is seen by its stakeholders, rather than a change implementer’s perspective on the planning and implementation phases of the organizational change. In addition, the findings suggest change implementers can begin to understand how employees make sense of change, which may ultimately help them manage and support employees more effectively following an organizational change. The scholarly implications are discussed further in turn, followed by the study’s limitations and directions for future research.

### *Theoretical Implications*

This study draws attention to the employee experience and the complexity of employee sensemaking processes. The results demonstrate the complex effects of organizational change on employees and the role of identification, framing, and dissent in the sensemaking process. In large part, the extant organizational change literature does not explore an employee's understanding of change and the complexity of that understanding. Rather, existing organizational change research tends to focus on the planning stage of organizational change and communication tactics for change implementers (Lewis, 1999; Lewis, 2007; Lewis & Seibold, 1996), instead of the transition and its effects on stakeholders. For organizations experiencing turnover or other negative effects following a change, there is a lack of research to provide relevant insights into their issues. Although Lewis and Seibold (1993) explored ongoing change enactments, the employee experience is absent, despite its correlation to turnover and job satisfaction. By taking employee experiences and perspectives into account, implementers may be able to better influence stakeholders' impressions of an organizational change's effectiveness.

Specifically, this study provides an account of how multiple identities at different identification levels (organizational and role) can affect how employees make sense of an organizational change. For example, the soldier sensemaking process was marked by a significant role and organizational identification shift. Those participants demonstrating this process type tended to be highly identified with a franchise brand. With the change implementation, they were required to commit their efforts to the company or department instead. Because of this shift, those who employed the soldier type were more defensive

and power-oriented. By understanding an employee's high or low organizational or role identification before the implemented change, the change implementers may be able to expect the extent to which an employee will struggle with reidentification following the change enactment. Scott, et al. (1999) suggested supervisor and co-worker relationships had the strongest association with an employee's intent to leave. This study also provides an account of how an employee's relationship to his or her supervisor during a change may be impactful for how they make sense of the change. This was illustrated in the soldier sensemaking process, as one of the characteristics associated with this type was attributing blame, particularly toward those in leadership positions, whereas the evangelist sensemaking type was discernible by its inclusiveness. Individuals in supervisory roles should take note of the effects their relationship has on the implementation of change and employees' perception of the change. Since change does not happen in a vacuum, organizational leaders must factor in the role of stakeholder relationships on how employees make sense of a change enactment.

The influence of how employees frame a change also is integral for change implementers' understanding of the change and its effects. Extant framing literature that connects framing to organizational change is limited. If, as Weick (1993) stated, individuals employ frames based on their associated group, then the study of framing in organizations and specifically, in times of organizational change, can provide further insights into employee sensemaking. Employee sensemaking in organizational change has not been extensively researched. Framing allows for interpretation of surroundings and experiences (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), therefore employees adjust their communication to those with whom they interact. The inclusion (i.e., those demonstrating

evangelist sensemaking) or exclusion (i.e., those demonstrating lone wolf sensemaking) of other stakeholders in storytelling is indicative of an individual's interpretation of the change. In fact, by studying use of voice in narratives as a framing tactic, employers can easily connect with whom an employee identifies, and better understand the influence on their sensemaking process.

Often, leaders discourage dissent expression (Lewis & Seibold, 1996), but it can provide insights into how an employee handles an organizational change. The types of dissent employees enact provide insight into the intent of the individual. For example, Garner (2009a) found that the primary goals of dissent were advice and information requests. In fact, dissent expression is indicative of a highly identified workforce (Garner, 2012), so providing opportunities for feedback, as Scott et al. (1999) suggested, and perhaps even promoting dissent expression following change may be useful for change implementers. If those in supervisory roles recognize how employees are making sense of a change implementation, they may be able to limit negative reactions like burnout, low job satisfaction, and turnover. Existing dissent literature focuses on upward dissent, but studying lateral dissent may provide additional information about why stakeholders choose different types of dissent tactics in different scenarios. By extending organizational change dissent literature to include lateral dissent, organizations may be able to get a better grasp on the organizational atmosphere following change, and preempt burnout and intent to leave. Additionally, those who are emotionally exhausted and experiencing burnout have low levels of lateral and articulated dissent (Avtgis et al., 2007). Thus, encouraging dissent, whether lateral or upward, is beneficial in preventing

negative repercussions following an organizational change, as Scott et al. (1999) proposed.

This study's theoretical implications extend organizational change literature and begin to reveal nuances of how employees and other stakeholders adjust in change environments. Organizations considering change implementation should factor in the influence of identification, framing, and dissent on how employees make sense of change. This study also extends framing literature to include use of voice as a framing tactic and lateral dissent as a relevant insight into the sensemaking process. In sum, the findings of this study lay a foundation for understanding the sensemaking processes of employees following a change and may allude to practical ways for improving transitions based on how employees make sense of the change.

#### *Practical Implications*

The results of this study have practical implications for change implementers and stakeholders of an organizational change. These findings suggest employees' dialogue and retrospective storytelling shapes how they make sense of change. Participants often vacillated between the four sensemaking types, thus documenting the ongoing process of sensemaking throughout their interviews. Considering the sensemaking processes of employees affected by change initiatives may help implementers better understand and evaluate organizational change as it affects employees.

The four sensemaking types participants demonstrated (lone wolf, soldier, evangelist, and voyeur) provide some practical implications for those in leadership positions. By understanding those types employed by participants, supervisors gain insight into the motivations and perspective of employees. For employees demonstrating

the lone wolf sensemaking process, change implementers and leaders should clearly define role duties and positively reinforce their job and task achievements. The lone wolf type is denoted by high role identification; therefore, those exhibiting this type value their position and job. By understanding their motivation, supervisors may be able to mitigate the effects of an uncertain and tumultuous change environment.

Discerning factors for the soldier sensemaking process include low company, departmental, and role identification. Because of this, employers should recognize that those employees who are making sense of the change in this way consider themselves part of a victimized group. These individuals feel unacknowledged or disrespected, so supervisors should listen and acknowledge their reidentification difficulties and work to assuage their concerns when possible.

Adversely, those who demonstrate the evangelist type are often in leadership positions and take some form of ownership for the organizational change enactment. This leadership perspective differentiates the evangelist sensemaking process. Change implementers often demonstrate the evangelist sensemaking process, and as a result, assume others see the situation similarly. Supervisors should recognize that those employees who demonstrate this type are highly identified with the department and company, but their viewpoint is not representative of all of those affected by change.

Finally, the voyeur sensemaking process is perceptible by its lack of organizational identification on all levels. This spectator-type process allows those who make sense of the change this way to separate himself or herself from the uncertainty of the situation as a sort of defense mechanism. Although, those who demonstrate the voyeur type are least likely to leave an organization, they can seem withdrawn or even

arrogant in their imperviousness. Change implementers should recognize identification is not necessarily a problem and mustn't be forced, as it could create backlash from employees exhibiting the voyeur sensemaking process.

By taking employees' sensemaking processes and insights into account, implementers may be able to better influence impressions of an organizational change and, ultimately, reduce turnover following change. Employee sensemaking of a change enactment can influence employee retention and future recruitment efforts (Scott et al., 1999). With the understanding of this typology, change implementers can better understand their employees' views of the change and respond accordingly.

#### *Study Limitations and Future Research*

In furthering the practical study of organizational change, I suggest four possible directions for future research. First, researchers should examine the sensemaking of employees in more varied organizations and geographical areas. The present study's insight into employee sensemaking of an organizational change is somewhat limited because it was confined to a single organization in the Southwestern United States. Ultimately, this study's greatest limitation was its small sample size. As with any case study, there is the potential that the insights drawn from this research are too limited to be applicable to future research. This study provides a rigorous and complex understanding of how DSC marketing department employees made sense of organizational change, but since it was a case study of 20 individuals who experienced the same organizational change, this analysis may not be generalizable to other organizational change implementations. The small sample size in addition to the unique organizational structure generates potential distinctions from other organizations. For example, many of the

participants were highly identified with a franchise brand before the departmental restructure. Fundamentally, they were more highly identified with a different organization than DSC. Most departmental restructures would not include such a significant organizational identification adjustment. Because of the unique format of a franchising organization, the organizational structure may have more or different identity-related implications than a more traditionally structured organization. For example, in the data analysis process, I coded for department, sub-department, franchise brand, and company identification on the organizational level. Because of this, it is not clear whether these results are applicable to other organizations in different locations or differently-structured organizations. Future research should explore employee sensemaking about organizational change across varied organizations. In addition, there's a potential bias by the researcher, although previously stated, that may be a factor. I knew all of the participants from my employment at DSC, so that prior relationship may have social implications in an interview setting.

Secondly, I encourage scholars to examine other aspects of the aftermath of organizational change. Most scholarship focuses on planning and implementing change, rather than understanding the aftermath of an already enacted change and how it affects employee satisfaction and effectiveness. Change can be jarring and a negative experience for stakeholders and employees. By evaluating methods of employee uncertainty reduction and how employees make sense of organizational change enactments, implementers of change may be able to address and avoid employee burnout, low job satisfaction, and ultimately, intent to leave.



Third, I suggest pursuing the complexity of understanding employee perceptions of change in other forms. Dissent, identification, and framing are not the only influencing factors on employee sensemaking. Researchers may consider how leadership styles, leader communication tactics, or organizational control factor into the sensemaking of employees. This typology provides a starting point for future organizational change research by asserting the complexity of a stakeholder's sensemaking and its importance to perceived effective change implementation. Employee sensemaking is complex and should be studied as such. Future research should benefit from understanding the influence of identification, framing usage, and dissent expression on employee sensemaking and move forward with additional studies on influencing factors in the sensemaking process.

Fourth, once change implementers begin to evaluate and understand employee sensemaking of change, it's worthwhile to delve into ways to mitigate the possible negative fallout, including intent to leave, burnout, and low job satisfaction. Organizational changes have negative connotations because they create an environment of uncertainty. The lack of attention to the aftermath of change and the employee experience in prior research inadvertently suggests ambivalence toward the actual enactment of change and its effect on stakeholders. What should change implementers do if their change implementation has resulted in excessive turnover and an unhappy workforce? In the future, researchers should work to answer this question in organizational change literature.

Moving forward, I encourage scholars and practitioners to focus on how organizational change enactment affects employees, their sensemaking of change, and the

complexity of its effects on employee job satisfaction. These efforts would extend organizational change literature to include more research on the employee experience and their sensemaking of change. This study suggests employee sensemaking is complex, and it charts a new direction for the literature on sensemaking to include more influencing factors like identification, framing, and dissent. By focusing on the employee experience, rather than the change planning and implementation processes, researchers can enrich how organizations support stakeholders who experience a large organizational change.

### *Conclusion*

With many organizations enacting organizational changes, employees are thrown into environments marked by uncertainty regularly. It is my hope that this study impresses upon readers the importance of the employee experience within the organizational change process. This study employed qualitative methods and narrative analysis to investigate the influence of identification, framing, and dissent on sensemaking following an organizational change implementation, in an effort to shed light on the complexity of employee sensemaking and the effect of organizational changes on that process. The resulting typology produced four types of sensemaking processes, which the 20 participants demonstrated. Employees made sense of the change enactment through the form of enacted dissent and its recipient (upward or lateral), use of voice, and degree of identification with roles and the different organizational levels. Although this is a limited view into the sensemaking of employees following an organizational change implementation, it provides a rigorous understanding of the difficulty associated with a large organizational change. This study examined the

complexity of employee experiences and provided a foundation for future research to explore the role of employee sensemaking on organizational change effectiveness.

## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

### Interview Guide

1. Demographic information. Name. Age. Ethnicity. Single or married.
2. What was your position at DSC before and after the change?
3. How long did you work at DSC?
4. Tell me about the marketing department restructure in your own words. From how it was announced, to how it affected your work relationships, to how it affected your day-to-day job tasks.
5. Tell me about how you provided feedback, if at all. For example, did you talk to co-workers, talk to family members, or leave passive aggressive notes, etc.?
  - a. Dealing with the change has to come out somewhere—how did it come out for you?
6. How did you cope with the change?
7. How did you identify with the company before and after the change? Did you feel loyal to your job? To the company?
8. What was one of your most memorably frustrating days?
9. Was there a singular event (trigger) that led you to start looking elsewhere?
  - a. If you stayed, why did you decide to stay when so many were leaving?
10. Tell me about the circumstances of when and how you left. What was your exit interview like?

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