Analyzing Conflict in Organizations with Positioning Theory: A Narrative Inquiry

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, John and Rosie Pearl Ghosten and John and Fannie Mae Weaver, and to my family for their support, love, strength, and sacrifice.

Acknowledgements

Due to my deep spiritual convictions, I first begin with thanking my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Your constant presence has made this degree possible. May I honor you in all that I do. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the chair of my doctoral committee, Dr. Trena Paulus. Thank you for the patience, guidance, and support you provided during my doctoral program. I wish especially to thank Dr. John Peters, who served as a member of my committee, and who first introduced me to Collaborative Learning and Positioning Theory. Because of your vision, you have opened a broad range of possibilities in my professional practice. I also wish to thank the remaining members of my committee, Dr. Mary Ziegler and John Haas, whose insights during this process have been invaluable.

Abstract

Positioning theory has yet to fully cross over as an analytical tool for examining conflict in business and industry. The manner in which positioning theory explains human interactions (specifically conflicts) could prove to be beneficial to the field of Organizational Development (OD). This study uses critical events narrative analysis to examine the stories of five supervising managers at a large corporate organization who were dealing with conflict caused by a reorganization. Interview data was collected and analyzed to identify the managers' critical events, as well as primary issues, main characters, and common conflict themes. The data was then analyzed using a framework rooted in positioning theory to determine participants' perspectives regarding conflict. Positions, speech acts, and storylines for each participant were identified. There were four storylines relating to conflict for those who either supported or were against the centralization: Management as Conscientious Business Leaders, Management as Thoughtless, Employees as Troublemakers, and Supervisors versus Subordinates. Additionally, there were two storylines relating to the conflict theme of Operating in New Roles: Supervisors versus Subordinates and Site versus Corporate. The study also proves useful in identifying a new indicator of polarized cultures. As a result, the study provides greater insight into how positioning theory can be an effective medium for analyzing the nature of conflicts in the corporate setting.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Conflict is a natural part of the corporate setting when change occurs. For the organizational development consultant, helping to resolve conflict can be a key responsibility. Effectively resolving conflict often begins with examining the conflict from a systems perspective (which is to view the organization as a fixed and linear system) to better understand the causes of the conflict. This study proposes a more dynamic alternative to resolving conflict via positioning theory, which is designed to specifically explore human interaction and its consequences. To this end, this study focuses on using positioning theory as an analytical tool for examining the nature of conflict during a centralization that occurred at a utility company.

Background

Clampitt (2005) identifies a healthy organizational culture as a key component to organizational success. He defines it as "the underlying belief and value structure of an organization collectively shared by the employees and symbolically expressed in a variety of overt and subtle ways" (p. 47). Schein (2010) further describes organizational culture as the personality and character of an organization. It reveals the basic patterns of assumptions and mindsets of that organization. Organizational culture also affects the organization's ability to solve and analyze problems, the ways that organizations respond and adapt to change, motivation in the workplace, and customer satisfaction (Clampitt, 2005). In light of these influences, both academic literature and popular literature encourage organizations to evaluate their culture on an ongoing basis and both have found a causal link between culture and performance (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Clampitt, 2005).

Conflicts among team members within organizations are common and can threaten organizational culture. Dana (2001) defines a workplace conflict as "a condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problems" (p. 5). Given this definition, it can be concluded that conflict involves people, their perspectives, their emotions, and their actions. Conflicts are viewed as primarily negative experiences and the perception of "fault" is placed squarely on the shoulders of the "other," with little consideration of how one's "self" might have influenced the conflict.

Dana's definition provides a good starting point; however, it primarily points to the negative implications associated with the word. It is also important to acknowledge the positive impacts of conflict, especially if the purpose is to engage individuals in discussions about workplace conflict, which would involve them sharing their perspectives, opinions, and assumptions. An alternate and equally valid perspective of conflict is that it can be viewed as a necessary and natural part of a business's evolutionary process that helps team members make decisions and reach consensus. Andrade, Plowman, and Duchon (2008) describe conflict as the fuel that drives organizations and call for a perspective that recognizes the positive benefits of conflict. They assert that because conflict is common, organizations should embrace the inevitability of conflict as leverage for looking for opportunities to improve the organization.

Nevertheless, conflicts are often viewed as negative and can be a drain on a company's bottom line. Employees spend an estimated 42% of their time "engaging in or attempting to resolve conflict," so it is no wonder that there have been various studies on resolving conflict (Dana, 2001, p. 19). Among these studies is one that focuses on how managers should manage conflict and suggests that the manager should use a confrontational or non-confrontational

approach, depending upon how close the manager is to the employees (Morrill, 1991). While the study focuses on relationships, there is little consideration given to how these relationships were created and the individual's assumptions during the conflict. Both of these elements would contribute to a more fundamental perspective of the conflict. Researchers have also looked at supervisors who have been successful at resolving conflicts in hopes of duplicating their successes (Nelson, Evans, Triggiano, & Barnes, 2008), but this approach does not consider the impact an individual's assumptions have on conflict because it assumes that what worked in one context will work in another. There has been research that discusses the importance of identifying perspectives in conflict, but the primary focus remains on processes (Lynch, 2001). All of these studies (Lynch, 2001; Morrill, 1991; Nelson et al., 2008) seem to imply that the organizational environment is fixed, as if the participants were passive participants rather than participants who actively create the environment. However, Ford (1999) argues that viewing the organization as a social construction could help the organization construct new and different realities.

Rahim (2002) identifies a common problem for conflict resolution, which is that much of the literature on conflict resolution does not consider the importance of the diagnostic phase of conflict resolution. The literature basically begins with how to address the conflict once it is observed. However, Rahim (2002) asserts that the diagnosis of the conflict informs the intervention, which is why greater attention should be paid to diagnosing the conflict. He further explains that a skilled consultant must employ the proper diagnostic technique. The next section will consider one such consultant, commonly referred to as an organizational development consultant.

The role of organizational development consultants in conflict mediation.

Organizations need to handle conflicts swiftly and efficiently. To this end, an organization may employ a consultant skilled in the techniques of conflict mediation. One responsibility of organizational development (OD) professionals is to help mediate conflicts that might interfere with the effectiveness of the organizational culture. OD is a problem-solving approach primarily concerned with organizational change. It identifies interventions to improve organizational culture, organizational structure, operational strategy, leadership continuity, and workforce development (Dobriansky, 2005; Rees, 2007).

As an OD consultant, I have often been called upon to help mediate conflicts when they begin to interfere with performance. Those conflicts are usually between team members in a given workgroup. My process involves interviewing everyone on the team to gather the different perspectives about the nature of the conflict, analyzing those perspectives for common themes, and then providing recommendations as to how management might go about resolving the conflict to improve the overall team dynamics. Interviewing to identify performance issues is consistent with Jim and Dana Gaines Robinson's (1995) approach to performance consulting within organizations. The essence of the model is to help identify the fundamental issue or issues so that an effective solution might be discovered.

Although the Robinson model was developed to design quality training programs and systems, their approach has been widely adopted and broadly applied within my organization, particularly in the area of diagnosing a broad range of performance issues (including conflict). It involves examining the current state in comparison to the desired state and identifying gaps that would need to be addressed to move to the desired state (Robinson & Robinson, 1995). What is most attractive about the process is the attention it places on analysis; however, the current

model primarily considers performance. This analytical approach can be broadened to better examine things like an individual's assumptions and how these assumptions construct dynamic relationships.

Root cause analysis is another popular approach to analyzing or diagnosing problems within an organization. It was initially developed in the mid-seventies to enable the utility industry to analyze issues in large nuclear construction projects (Sandlin, Sapple, & Gautreaux, 2004). Due to its rigorous and detailed analysis, it has been adapted for a number of different contexts (Sandlin et al., 2004). It involves a systematic and comprehensive review, including considerations of structural, procedural, and people considerations. While the emphasis is on diagnosing the issue, the approach stems from identifying project errors with the objective of identifying the fundamental cause(s) of the problem. This systems perspective implies a similarity between people and machinery and ignores the fluid and dynamic nature of human interaction. As with the Robinson and Robinson model (1995), current root cause analysis models do not deal with individual assumptions of people, only their behavior.

Arguably, conflicts may exemplify a surface-level condition of a more deeply rooted issue stemming from people's assumptions and perspectives. It is my desire to improve my OD techniques to more adequately analyze assumptions inherent in conflicts in order to uncover the nature of the conflict from the individuals' perspectives, as well as the meaning they make of the conflict. This level of analysis may determine the best way to resolve the conflict because it would involve addressing the issues important to those who are engaged in the conflict. The resolution might then be more meaningful to those who are engaged in it. Uncovering these hidden assumptions may change the perspective of the conflict from negative to positive.

Statement of the Problem

Current conflict mediation research has not fully addressed the perspectives of individuals, or how their interactions cause conflict. However, Ford (1999) suggests that the organization is a social construction of the discursive practices of those within the organization. Given this perspective, reality is not something that is waiting to be discovered; instead, it is something that is actively created by its participants. Analytical tools used within the organization, like root cause analysis, stem from a systems perspective. The assumption of these tools is that the organization is a "rational, linear system in which cause and effect are tightly linked, systems are predictable, and organizational stability is achieved through planning and control" (Andrade, Plowman, & Duchon, 2008, p. 23). When an incident happens, the organization performs a root cause analysis, with the purpose of getting to the root of what caused the problem so that the issue will not be repeated. However, these tools may not be effective in uncovering fundamental issues related to people due to the dynamic and complex nature of people who have the ability to choose (Andrade, Plowman & Duchon, 2008). The current tools do not seek to address the people's perspectives and seem more appropriate for mechanistic issues, which limits the analysis. While a machine, unlike humans, can be programmed to make decisions, it was still designed with the purpose of operating consistently. In addition, a machine does not have free will. In direct contrast, people do not operate in consistent ways. Therefore, a better method more suitable for examining these human interactions and how these relationships are constructed is needed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how positioning theory might be used in an analysis of the assumptions of individuals engaged in a conflict within an organizational setting.

More specifically, this study focuses on an organization engaged in restructuring, where individuals were unclear about work roles and responsibilities. Essentially, they were reconstructing their working relationships, which may well cause friction because this reconstruction occurs in a social realm. The findings may be useful in understanding the fundamental nature of the conflict within the current context, and may also provide a better understanding of positioning theory's usefulness as a tool for analyzing conflicts in an organizational setting.

Research Question

Populating the positioning triangle facilitates a positioning approach to analyzing and understanding conflict. To this end, the study will address the following research question: what storylines, positions, and speech acts are evident in participants' stories of conflict within the context of a recent reorganization?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in social constructionism. It identifies a connection between positioning theory and social constructionism in that the identification of the positioning triads demonstrates how the individuals were actively constructing conflict within the organization. Constructionism makes certain assertions about the nature of reality and knowledge. Social constructionists believe that knowledge is something that is created through communal agreement (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Given this principle, knowledge is not something that is waiting to be discovered, but something that is constructed within community. We make the meaning together. Thus, constructionism places more emphasis on the collective nature of reality and knowledge. For the OD consultant, this might involve recognizing that there may be many

different perspectives of a conflict. The gathering of these perspectives can be powerful in helping to determine how the OD consultant should proceed.

Positioning is a construction of social interaction and discourse. Harre and Moghaddam (2003) assert that actions can be either appropriate or inappropriate for the individuals within that community, which pertains to the perception of individual rights and duties. According to Harre and Moghaddam, "Positions are social in the sense that the relevant beliefs of each member are similar to those of every other" (p. 4). These positions are negotiated through discourse and action. Thus, they are a product of communal agreement.

As positioning theory is consistent with my professional philosophy and my academic studies, this study will use the theory to analyze conflicts and identify underlying assumptions present among members of management who experienced conflict during a reorganization where certain union-represented employees were moved to a central location. Since the study occurred after the centralization, it deals with participants' perspectives of how they felt they were positioned during the centralization. Ultimately, the findings will create an awareness of a different and better way for me to understand this conflict within the organization.

Positioning Theory.

Positioning theory has previously been used as a tool for analyzing conflicts (Harre & Slocum, 2003). It is a process that allows one to analyze how discourse is used to construct relationships (Winslade, 2005). The theory emphasizes the importance of language because it is the vehicle by which interpretations of reality are constructed. As Harre and van Langenhove (1999) suggest, "It is within conversations that the social world is created, just as causality-linked things according to their properties constitute the natural world" (p.15).

Here, the use of the term "positioning" is an intentional one, and should not be confused with "role." The word "position" implies the kind of fluidity that is inherent in the nature of the interaction, whereas "role" connotes a more fixed and rigid experience (Phillips, Fawns, & Hayes, 2002). It involves how the person situates him or herself, or is situated by another within the conversation, and how that person can change if the situation changes. Harre and van Langenhove (1999) describe positions as follows: "positions can and do change. Fluid positioning, not fixed roles, are used by people to cope with the situation they usually find themselves in" (p. 17).

Harre and Moghaddam (2003) describe positioning theory as a three-pronged model (the positioning triangle) that binds individuals by certain beliefs about their rights and duties within a community or context. Positioning theory is rooted in the works of Wittgenstein, in that it is focused on discourse, and Vygotsky, in that it acknowledges the creative tendencies of human interaction (Phillips, Fawns, & Hayes, 2002). Specifically, positioning theory draws from the Wittgensteinian notion that language is critically important to constructing social reality. It also draws from Vygotsky's view that certain linguistic and manipulative skills are needed to make sense of cognitive processes and experiences (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999).

Harre and Moghaddam (2003) elaborate that positioning accounts for the possible actions that one might take within a given situation. For instance, position theory would suggest that there are multiple possibilities for how an employee would react to being told by management that they must relocate to another city. The employee may disagree, refuse, express gratitude, or comply. Harre and Moghaddam assert that "A position implicitly limits how much of what is logically possible for a given person to say and do and is properly a part of the person's repertoire of actions at a certain moment in a certain context, including other people" (Harre &

Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5). The specific vertices of the positioning triangle include position, speech and other acts, and storyline (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999; Harre & Moghaddam, 2003).

Positioning theory also looks at how power (or agency) is enacted within an exchange. The theory helps to identify who has the right to position and who does not. As one researcher notes, "Implicit within this model is the agency that people demonstrate in achieving, accepting or rejecting positioning acts within the conversation" (Arkoudis, 2005, p. 175). In other words, individuals are positioned and repositioned, and they position others. Again, the positioning is dynamic in that it is constantly open for renegotiation as members of the exchange assert their sense of perceived power by initiating, accepting, or rejecting positioning acts.

According to Harre and Moghaddam (2003), positioning can either be deliberate or inadvertent. If the positioning is deliberate, then specific policies, programs, and so forth may be put in place to uphold the positioning. For instance, within the context of this study, one of management's inherent rights (as identified in the language of the contract for the specific union representing the affected employees of this centralization) is that management has the right to determine where certain work will be located. If the positioning is inadvertent, then it may be the result of long-held beliefs and values that cause the positioning to be inherent within the culture.

Additionally, Harre and Moghaddam (2003) suggest that individuals can be repositioned, which challenges the initial positioning: "To engage in repositioning oneself or others is to claim a right or a duty to adjust what an actor has taken to be the first order positioning that is dominating the unfolding of events" (p. 5). For example, employees filing a grievance on the reclassification of positions would be seen as a challenge of the initial positioning. The following sections further define positioning theory by describing each point on the positioning triangle.

Position.

Position refers to those rights and duties to act a certain way at a certain time; however, there are also certain actions individuals may not have access to because they are either denied access or refused access. For instance, a decision to centralize would largely be a corporate management decision. As a result, those impacted by the centralization may not feel they have the right to question the centralization. They would not be positioned as peers with corporate management. Again, positioning theory suggests that there are certain power dynamics at play; however, it is important to remember that even these un-accessed actions are considered a part of the individual's repertoire of actions whether the individual recognizes it or not. Those who are impacted could have questioned corporate management's decisions if they chose to withhold their opinion. Also, a new employee may feel that he or she has no other alternative but to comply with management's order to centralize, even though it would be within the range of possibilities to ask questions or express verbal disagreement, as was the case with some of the more experienced employees. In this instance, the new employee could have also expressed disagreement, but was not aware of his or her right to do so. However, it would still be considered part of his or her repertoire of possible actions.

Harre (2005) suggests that when individuals talk about "rights" they are often referring to some sort of entitlement. "Duty" refers to some sort of action upon which an individual should act. A supervisor's disciplinary responsibilities serve as an excellent example for distinguishing between rights and duties. For instance, a supervisor might consider his or her authority to make certain decisions about the type of discipline as a "right" in the corporate setting. He or she may then distinguish the actual responsibility of disciplining employees for certain employment infractions as a "duty." This notion of rights and duties helps to explain the supervisor's

perspective in issuing discipline and what position he or she is likely to take in issuing the discipline.

Both "right" and "duty" imply a sense of moral obligation. In fact, Bullough and Draper (2004) argue that the very act of positioning helps us to understand a person's sense of moral order and his or her position within that context. That sense of moral obligation in turn influences the people's own understanding of their rights and duties. In looking back at the supervisory example, the supervisor might feel morally obligated to discipline his or her employee for a particular infraction because of the authority that the company has given him or her to do so. He or she may feel that one form of discipline (e.g. written warning) is more appropriate than another (e.g. suspension), depending upon the nature of the infraction. From this perspective, discipline is a management expectation. In other words, supervisors are expected to discipline their employees for violating company policy and are expected to determine the appropriate type of discipline.

It is also important to note that these rights and duties often vary across cultures and contexts. For instance, Hoppe-Graffe and Kim (2005) found that German and Korean adolescents defined rights and duties differently in their study. The researchers held that these differences are related to cultural influences. When this discussion about rights and duties is applied to the description of positioning theory, one should keep in mind that how a person feels he or she is entitled or obligated to act may not look the same for everyone.

Finally, positions can be thought of in terms of first, second, and third-order. First-order involves the initial positioning act, which relates to how an individual positions him or herself, or is positioned by others. Second-order positioning refers to a challenge of the initial positioning

act, and occurs when an individual attempts to position him or herself differently. Third-order positioning occurs outside of the social exchange (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999).

Speech acts.

The second point on the positioning triangle is speech acts. This refers to the specific act that is being performed within a social context to which meaning is assigned. The initiating utterance is the illocutionary force and the pending response or consequence is the perlocutionary force (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). The idea that the act is a joint construction of a social interaction is a key distinction identified by Davies and Harre (1999). This means that the impact of the utterance is not solely based on the intentions of the individual, but the meaning of the utterance is negotiated in social interactions.

The act must first be considered by participants in terms of whether it is appropriate given the situation, and then the act influences subsequent actions. This notion is very similar to Wittgenstein's (2003) concept of language games. From the Wittgensteinian perspective, participants engrossed in conversation are participating in a kind of game, referred to as a language game (Buttny, 1986; Delanty, 1997; Gergen, 1999). In other words, Wittgenstein recognizes that language is used in patterns in different situations. Each word or phrase can be likened to a move of sorts. Someone asking, "What time is it," represents a move. The other person must then move in a logical manner. He or she would respond by indicating the time, "It's 5 p.m." Conversely, the individual would not be operating within the rules of the game if he or she responded with, "It's Tuesday." That response would be considered inappropriate given the situation. It is not possible to say just anything in conversational situations; rather, there are specific criteria or rules that govern our responses depending on the storyline (Buttny, 1986; Gergen, 1999).

Wittgenstein's view positions language as more than just a communicative device. The idea of language as a tool creates the impression of a passive object. However, language is not merely a passive tool. It is the driving force that actively creates our realities. Moreover, these constructions are inherently social. Wittgenstein's views highlight that our reactions and responses are never solely dependent upon one person. Instead, our actions are always influenced, shaped, defined by, and negotiated within the social realm. As Shotter (1995) observes, "What Wittgenstein brings to our attention, is the nature and extent of the usually unnoticed, background activities constituting the everyday lives we live, as non-intellectualizing, non-deliberating, embodied beings, spontaneously reacting and responding to those around us" (p. 2).

Similarly, there are certain moves that one makes in an interaction that undeniably distinguish the interaction as a conflict. To make this point, I will revisit the example used previously in the discussion of language games. If someone asks for the time, and after hearing the response replies with, "It's not 5 p.m. It's only 3:30 p.m.," then the potential for a conflict exists. In this exchange one person has challenged another person's statement, the specific cue that the exchange could result in a conflict.

Admittedly, it could be argued that this exchange may not necessarily result in a conflict, but it does demonstrate that there must be some kind of differing viewpoint expressed within the exchange. As previously addressed, one definition of a conflict is that it involves perspectives, emotions, and actions. Additionally, in this specific type of language game individuals usually passionately persist in their conflicting viewpoints, leading to further polarization. However, these moves or speech acts also are usually dictated by the history of the individuals engaged in the disagreement, which leads to the remaining point on the positioning triangle: the storyline.

Storyline.

Storylines are established patterns of group interactions that tend to inform future interactions. As Harre and Moghaddam (2003) suggest, the way individuals respond to one another is not totally random, but can be a consequence of previous interactions. For instance, the type of discipline a supervisor gives may not be dependent solely upon what the employee did wrong. The supervisor may take into consideration his or her previous encounters with the individual, which is operating within a type of storyline.

The potential storylines could either be "the problem employee" or "the model employee." Depending upon the perspective of the supervisor, the resulting disciplinary action could be very different. For example, if the supervisor perceives that the employee has been a *model employee*, then that supervisor might be inclined to issue a more lenient disciplinary action compared to the one he or she may issue to the *problem employee*. Likewise, the tone of the discussion would vary depending upon the specific storyline the supervisor is following.

Another example is the interactions between parents and their children. There may be a number of potential storylines for this type of relationship. One storyline might be the "rebellious teen" and another storyline might be the "apathetic or out of touch parent." However, it is important to remember that even these interactions would not be based on a single instance. Storylines involve people's assumptions, biases, and habits. As a consequence, their potential to influence a particular interaction extends beyond the original actors of the originating incident. For instance, the way parents choose to raise their children may be a direct result of the way they were raised. Likewise, the interactions between a supervisor and an employee may result from how that supervisor was treated by his or her superior when he or she was a subordinate.

Now that the components of positioning theory have been explored, the next section will focus on the significance of the study. Considerations for the significance to my practice and positioning theory will be discussed.

Significance of the Study

Related to my practice of organizational development, findings of the study may challenge the conventional way of analyzing conflict. Findings may provide an alternative to the linear, rigid process of root cause analysis or performance-based consulting by exploring fluid interactions, bringing people's perspectives to the forefront.

As for positioning theory, the study explores the applicability of the theory in the corporate environment. This is a setting quite different from the context in which positioning theory has traditionally been used. It also expands the use of the theory into the area of understanding an organizational environment.

Delimitations of the Study

Perhaps the most obvious delimitation of this study is that the research participants are primarily comprised of members of management. In order to gain research access within the organization, I intentionally avoided interviewing acquisition agents (these were individuals who actually received the orders to centralize) because they are represented by a labor union. Since I was formerly the human resources representative during the centralization, with the primary responsibility of representing management, my management and I felt gaining access to the agents would be problematic and could potentially put the organization at risk. There has long been an antagonistic relationship between the particular union representing the agents and the organization, so we felt my intentions would not be trusted and would only exacerbate the situation. The agents were also engaged in a grievance at the time the interviews were conducted

and I strongly felt I could not ignore my responsibilities to protect the organization for the sake of this study.

Since the acquisition agents did not participate in the study, the perspectives offered here are very much representative of management perspectives. A more detailed analysis would include the perspectives of all those engaged in the conflict. There is one representation of the acquisition agent perspective, however. This agent was a member of management at the time of the interviews. He agreed to the study (and even looked forward to the opportunity to share his story), so I was able to interview him. Interestingly, he spoke more from the perspective of an acquisition agent during the interview than he did a member of management. Of course, this was likely due to the fact that I was asking him about his perspective during the time of the centralization. Shortly after relocating to the new centralized location, however, he returned to his original plant site as a manager of the Resource Control Coordinators (RCC). His participation in the study at least provided one perspective of the acquisition agents.

Another delimitation of the study is in the area of data collection. This study relies on interview data; however, observations would have added to the richness of the interpretation of the data because they require the researcher to immerse him or herself within the culture in order to obtain a firsthand account of participants' experiences (Waddington, 2004). Unfortunately, observations were not a possibility for this particular study because the centralization occurred prior to the actual study. However, as the human resource representative for the organization at the time of the centralization, I was very familiar with the culture and conflicts of the organization.

Limitations of the Study

Because this study deals with the perspectives of the participants and the positioning that occurred within a specific context, it stands to reason that a different set of participants would yield entirely different results. For this reason, the findings are limited to this specific study. However, others may be able to adapt the process for their own specific purposes.

Definitions

One key aspect of the study will be how conflict is defined. As mentioned earlier, there are varied definitions of conflict and these definitions each suggest a specific assumption about whether conflict is viewed either as positive or negative. For the purpose of identifying conflict in this study, I desired a more neutral view of conflict, defined as "differences of opinion or contradiction of interests among two or more people, parties or factors (departments, organizations, nations etc)" (Shetach, 2009, p. 82).

Organization of the Study

In this chapter I have argued that a more effective tool is needed to analyze fundamental issues relating to understanding contentious relationships within my organization. The organization of this dissertation begins with a focus in chapter one on the importance of dealing with conflict to the field of organizational development. Chapter two discusses the literature relating to conflict mediation and positioning theory. Chapter three identifies the methods for conducting the study and includes a discussion of risks and the trustworthiness of the data. Chapter four includes a presentation of the findings. The study concludes with chapter five, which explores contributions of the findings related to my immediate practice, the advancement of positioning theory, and considerations for the field of organizational development.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

This chapter will first review empirical studies in the area of conflict. The field of conflict within organizations is expansive and there are differing views in the literature on whether conflict should be resolved, managed, or encouraged. For this reason, studies representing each of these perspectives were selected based on their relevance to the corporate context. As an aside, this study does not attempt to weigh in on any particular perspective, but rather argues that how the conflict is analyzed or diagnosed informs the course of action one should take when confronting or dealing with conflict. Following the review of selected conflict literature, positioning theory studies will be explored to identify how positioning theory might be used as a tool to analyze conflicts.

Conflict Literature

I identified conflict literature by searching in relevant academic indexes such as Business Source Premiere, ERIC, JSTOR, and online Sage Journals. The search terms I used were conflict and organizations, conflict resolution and corporate organizations, conflict management and corporate organizations, and dispute resolutions and business. Most conflict mediation studies reviewed tended to focus on the process of confronting or dealing with conflict rather than focusing on the people or their perspectives. They also focused on mediation and resolution rather than analysis. While resolution might be an eventual aim, the analysis is an equally important step because it influences the outcome. Many of these studies treated the environment as fixed and gave little consideration to the dynamic nature of the environment and a context that was actively shaped by the participants.

Phillips and Cheston (1979) looked at the conflict experiences of 25 middle level managers, ranging between 30 to 45 years of age, using the critical incident methodology. A team of graduate students interviewed managers who participated in the Sloan Fellows program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, asking them to provide one example where positive results were achieved and one example where a negative resolution was achieved. The research team then categorized the responses of the managers.

The results revealed that the managers used four approaches when dealing with conflict. *Forcin*g involved a more authoritative approach to dealing with the conflict. The manager relied on his or her position of authority to impose a resolution. The *problem solving* approach involved seeking a resolution that met the objectives of both parties. *Compromising* involved an approach where the manager and the other party both agreed to give up something to reach a resolution. The last approach identified was *avoidance*. Managers who used this approach avoided direct confrontation and withheld their perspectives and assumptions about the conflict. Forcing and problem solving were the two most common approaches used by managers in this study; however, the researchers discovered that the managers often began with another problem solving approach before resorting to forcing.

The research team also found that conflict was usually caused by communication problems, personal relationships, and power struggles inherent in the organizational structure. Conflict resulting from communication issues was generally caused by unclear language, misunderstandings, or vague or partial information. Personal conflict involved individuals whose personalities or personal goals were incompatible with the organization. Structural conflict occurred when departments competed for resources or had competing goals. The researchers then discussed which approach (e.g. forcing) addressed a specific cause of conflict (e.g.

personal) more appropriately than another. Using this information, they were able to suggest a tentative model for conflict resolution, which involved knowing which conflict approach should be used to address a particular cause of conflict.

The Philips and Cheston (1979) study only addresses the behavior of the participants in the conflict, which remains true even in more current studies. While this is useful in resolving conflict, future research could be expanded to better understand the participants' perspective of the conflict and what they are doing to create the conflict. For instance, Philips and Cheston (1979) point to communication as a potential cause of conflict, but they do not present a clear picture of what that communication looks like and what impact communication has on the relationships of those involved in the conflict. Positioning theory may help to inform this aspect of the process, which would also provide better insight into whether a particular approach would indeed be desirable in a particular situation.

Using open-ended interviews, Morrill (1991) examines how executives in two large business organizations—one averaging 20,000 employees and the other averaging 35,000 employees—managed conflict. Morrill argues that the context or setting of the conflict is defined by the nature of the relationship. He references two types of settings: dense-knit settings and loose-knit settings. The loose-knit setting involves a kind of social distance between employees and executives where communication is sparse. Morrill notes that individuals within this setting tend to withdraw from confrontation. Conversely, the dense-knit setting involves tightly knit relationships with multiple channels of communication.

The nature of the relationships in Morrill's study influenced the executives' approach to managing conflict and informed how they should manage conflict. Morrill found that executives in loose-knit organizations should manage conflict non-confrontationally, meaning without direct

verbal communication, or should even avoid conflict altogether, because this would be in line with the cultural norms. Conversely, he asserts that executives in dense-knit settings should manage conflict confrontationally, meaning they should engage in direct communication.

Morrill (1991) examines relationships, which acknowledges the importance of human interactions. The study also deals with cultural norms, and, in a sense, what is appropriate within these varying contexts. However, Morrill's model does not adequately explain how these relationships came to be either dense or loose-knit. In other words, Morrill was not interested in examining what made some organizations loose-knit and others dense-knit. Rather, his interests relate more to how executives can effectively manage conflict within the confines of their given reality. One still does not know how and why these relationships exist. Instead, it appears that Morrill counted the number of relationships to determine whether the environment is either dense or loose-knit, which suggests he did not focus on the content of the communication within those relationships.

His study also does not deal with how and why these norms exist. In other words, he does not try to explain how these settings were created, establishing the implication that the environment could not be changed. His conclusions are from the perspective of the environment as a stagnate reality. A positioning approach might have provided more insight into what the people were actually doing that distinguished a setting as either dense or loose knit within the framework of position, speech act, and storylines. From this perspective, a manager could conceivably renegotiate the context because even this is recognized as something that is constructed from our discursive practices.

Rahim (2002) proposes a theory of managing organizational conflict as opposed to resolving conflict, arguing that the goal of much of the literature relating to conflict is to

eliminate or reduce conflict. He views conflict as an eventuality that cannot be avoided and promotes a kind of organizational culture that encourages members to engage in a problem-solving process. He then identifies a problem-solving process that includes problem sensing, problem formulation, recommending solutions to problems, preparing plans for intervention, putting plans into action, reviewing outcomes, and taking corrective action.

In identifying an effective conflict management strategy, Rahim (2002) differentiates between two different types of conflict: those that should be attained and those that should be eliminated. According to Rahim (2002), a moderate amount of substantive conflict relating to non-routine tasks should be attained. He describes substantive conflict as conflict that results when two or more agents within the organization disagree on content-related issues. His argument for striving to attain or maintain moderate levels of substantive conflict is based on studies that have found that substantive conflict leads to better decision-making abilities because it encourages a better understanding of the issue. Rahim (2002) also suggests that affective conflict should be minimized at various levels. Rahim identifies affective conflict as related to interpersonal conflict resulting from people's awareness of the lack of incompatibility with others in the area of their feelings and emotions. He argues that this type of conflict negatively impacts the group in the area of employment retention, job satisfaction, and group loyalty.

The last part of Rahim's (2002) strategy involves training members of the organization in selecting and using the appropriate conflict management strategy in dealing with affective conflict. He identifies several strategies, including integrating (reaching a mutual solution that would be agreeable to both parties), obliging (emphasizing commonalities with the goal of pleasing the other party), dominating (imposing one's own objectives on the other), avoiding (withdrawing from the issue), and compromising (mutual give and take where something is

sacrificed on either side). He suggests that each one of these strategies would be appropriate in the proper context.

Rahim (2002) concludes by bringing these components together to identify a conflict management process. The cyclical model includes diagnosis, intervention, conflict, learning effectiveness, and feedback, in that sequence, and then returns to diagnosis. This is where Rahim suggests the importance of the diagnostic phase, which this paper argues has been largely ignored. Rahim (2002) also expresses this sentiment and speaks of the importance of the diagnosis to informing the type of intervention that should be used. His plan for diagnosing the problem includes measuring the following: quantity of substantive and affective conflict, styles for handling conflict at various levels (interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup), sources of conflict, and learning and effectiveness for various entities (individual, group, organizational). Once these elements are measured, he suggests analyzing substantive and affective styles for handling conflict against the backdrop of the organizational norms, the relationship between conflict styles and their sources, and the relationship between conflict styles and the amount of learning and effectiveness.

Again, it is Rahim's (2002) call for proper diagnostic processes that most resonates with the intent of this study. In this study, it is believed that the analysis of people's perspectives can lead to a better understanding of the nature of the conflict and add more texture to the description of the conflict. While Rahim's (2002) model is fairly comprehensive, it still appears to be lacking in this area. Specifically, positioning theory would provide a different lens for identifying and describing affective conflict since it occurs at the interpersonal level. Also, like many other studies, Rahim (2002) does not address the dynamic nature of the environment.

Instead, he examines how to manage conflict within a given reality, with the underlying implication that the environment is fixed.

Nelson, Triggiano, and Barnes (2008) conducted a study interviewing supervisors who were viewed as highly competent in handling conflict. The supervisors were asked how they define and describe conflict, how they dealt with conflict in their previous experiences, and what specific strategies they use to manage conflict. The study led to deeper insight into some common characteristics of supervisors who have been successful in dealing with conflict, including humility, vulnerability, a willingness to engage in critical reflection, early communication of expectations, and so on.

Nelson et al. (2008) aim at identifying dependable strategies for dealing with conflict. They take the notion of dependable strategies from social cognitive theory, which is concerned with how people figure out what approach will be most effective. The study does focus on the social aspects of knowledge acquisition, which is similar to my beliefs. However, their supervisory study does not consider how the individuals involved were actively constructing conflict. It also does not look at the supervisors' perspectives of the nature of the relationships between them and their subordinates, which would lead to a better understanding of the essence of the conflict. The emphasis is more on how supervisors dealt with conflict once it occurred.

Their overall research interest was to uncover common successful strategies and characteristics, which generally suggests that what worked for these supervisors might work for other supervisors (although they did acknowledge that there might be some variance across cultures). Positioning theory, on the other hand, analyzes these interactions and uncovers the complexities of the situation, acknowledging that the analysis is specific to the participants within the dispute and the situation. Positioning theory analysis can help to address participants'

perspectives about the nature of the conflict, as well as help to uncover what sense they make of the conflict, which influences how they choose to deal with the conflict. Positioning theory might also prove useful in relation to Nelson et al.'s (2008) suggestion that clarifying roles between supervisors and subordinates is an important and effective supervisory strategy. Positioning theory might provide more insight into what accounts for clear roles between supervisors and subordinates by examining positions, speech acts, and storylines, particularly in aiding the parties to come to a mutual understanding of rights and duties.

Lynch (2001) argues for using a more integrated system for analyzing and resolving conflicts because, from her perspective, managing conflict involves not only resolving disputes, but also preventing and containing disputes. The essence of this argument is to use a system approach to make all available conflict interventions accessible. Lynch's (2001) approach is more concerned with process than the actors themselves. That is, she was looking for a more systematic way to resolve the conflict because traditional organizational methods only deal with conflict on an individual case basis, whereas the integrated conflict management model that Lynch proposes is concerned with creating a common process for addressing issues. Lynch suggests that relationships are essential to the resolution and management of conflict; however, she does not specifically mention analyzing that relationship to uncover the participants' attitudes and perceptions. Again, the focus of her argument is on the best process that should be employed. To that end, perhaps positioning theory could become part of the repertoire of interventions in terms of creating and sustaining a culture that addresses conflict.

Andrade, Plowman, and Duchon (2008) take a less conventional view towards conflict within the organization. They shun the notion that conflict is a problematic condition that needs to be eradicated, or that the impact of conflict can be predicted with precision. They suggest a

view of conflict that recognizes the organization as a complex and non-linear system that by its very nature will inevitably produce certain fluctuations (i.e. conflict). They argue that these fluctuations should be expected and members of the organization should learn to adapt to these fluctuations. This recognizes the ability of organisms to continually recreate and renew themselves.

This nonconventional stance on conflict within the organization would suggest that a nonconventional model for responding to conflict is needed. Andrade et al. (2008) suggests a model that includes improvisation, mindfulness, and re-configuration. The idea of improvisation is innovation. In other words, the organization's ability to improvise when responding to unanticipated fluctuations provides an opportunity for the organization to try out something new and even improve the condition of the organization. Improvisation requires skill and experience, which implies that the individual has been paying attention to and learning from the feedback that exists within the organization. Mindfulness describes an organization where individuals are extremely aware of the operations and processes of the organization and constantly looking for signals that suggest that something requires attention. Reconfiguration recognizes that a universal approach to responding to fluctuations will not always work. Instead, Andrade et al. (2008) favor allowing units to reconfigure themselves and to find the most appropriate way to adapt to the fluctuation.

The portion of the Andrade et al. (2008) model that most resonates with this study is the idea that organizations are complex, non-linear systems. As mentioned earlier, much of the literature treats organizations as linear, predictable, and stable systems. However, when viewed from the perspective that organizations are much more complex, a better approach to understanding conflict that addresses these complexities is needed. While Andrade et al. propose

a model designed to respond to these complexities, this model is not concerned with understanding the system from the perspective of the individual. This is a limitation in the area of mindfulness because assumptions and opinions are quite often the driving forces behind the operations and types of processes that are set within organizations.

While these studies and models are meaningful and insightful in their own right, they each contain the same limitation. For the reasons previously mentioned, studies thus far have not sought to explore the perspectives of those engaged in conflict. As an OD professional, considering perspectives is of particular interest to me because OD considers people experts of their own experience (Schein, 1992). Positioning theory places more emphasis on human interaction and experience in that it accounts for speech acts as well as for how individuals negotiate the positioning process, thereby making it possible to tap into their perspective about their conflict. In other words, this emphasizes what has been said or done and brings the people, their assumptions, and what they are doing to the forefront of the study.

As Campbell and Groenbaek (2006) suggest in their book on the positions people take within organizations, helping individuals see how they view the world and how they talk to one another influences their perception of the organization. Campbell and Groenbaek's model is built upon the premise that the essence of the organization is expressed through multiple discourses that represent different meanings, described as semantic polarities. Through the process of negotiating these polarities, people take up a position that they feel a certain way about. The position individuals take and the emotion they feel about that position define the relationship. As a result, the possibility exists for talking about their emotions using dialogue, and if dialogue can be achieved, then the potential for a new position also exists. Campbell and Groenbaek have

found within their work that helping individuals to see this helps them to move beyond stuck positions within organizations.

Examining participants' interactions within organizations is a matter of analyzing the various exchanges that occur. I have also asserted that how one analyzes a situation ultimately informs how that person deals with the issue. Therefore, a study of how conflicts can be analyzed is an equally worthwhile endeavor. Positioning theory shifts the emphasis to the analysis of what is occurring between those engaged in conflict, what they are creating together, and their perceptions about it so that those perspectives can then be properly addressed. Next, a review of the positioning theory literature will be covered.

Positioning Theory Literature

Similar databases, indexes, library catalogues, and electronic journals used to identify the literature about conflict were used to identify positioning theory literature. The search terms used were conflict and positioning theory, positioning theory and corporate organizations, and disputes and positioning theory.

Positioning theory in non-corporate contexts.

This study uses positioning theory as a means for better analyzing conflicts within the corporate setting. While many of the studies reviewed do not occur within the corporate environment, they still contain findings that may be useful to the corporate setting. Dennen (2007) conducted a naturalized study to examine instructor presence in three online classrooms. She used discussion transcripts and positioning theory to analyze asynchronous communication. Dennen (2007) is interested in determining how instructors positioned themselves, whether the students accepted this positioning, and how the positioning impacted the course discussion. Her

study attempts to move positioning theory beyond face-to-face interactions to the online social experiences, and to determine its applicability to asynchronous forms of communication.

Dennen (2007) found that first order positioning occurs more frequently than other forms of positioning. Rarely did the students in these online classrooms challenge the positioning of the instructor. She also found that students positioned the instructors in an authoritative role unless the professor positioned him or herself otherwise. One of her conclusions suggests that if teachers paid greater attention to the nature of their talk and how that talk positioned their students, there might be less contradiction between the teachers' espoused teaching philosophies and the actual relationship.

As was the case in Dennen's (2007) research, it was also interesting in this study to consider the impact managements' discourse had on the employee ranks and how that influenced the environment. Dennen is interested in the nature of the learning environment and how instructors' discourse shaped that environment. So, while, the study does not specifically address the organizational environment, Dennen's findings have relevance for this study as well.

Arkoudis (2005) employs positioning theory to examine how mainstream teachers prepare to teach specific content while balancing the challenge of teaching that content to students whose primary language is something other than English. Arkoudis uses positioning theory to analyze the sense of agency (or power) these teachers possess within the school environment. She also uses appraisal theory as a way to conduct a linguistic analysis of the resources the instructors use to negotiate their perspectives of language and content within discourse.

Arkoudis (2005) concludes that teachers need to do more than get together and share ideas to balance language and content teaching. She discusses power in terms of its importance

to the relationship when one particular teacher is given responsibility for teaching subject matter over another. Arkoudis noticed that one teacher accepted or rejected the ideas of the other, thereby asserting his sense of power in his interactions with the other teacher when subject matter was discussed. This notion of power negotiation is an interesting element to consider within my own study. For instance, I consider how power is negotiated from the perspective of the participants by looking at how they are positioned.

Some studies have utilized positioning theory in understanding identity development in professional settings. For instance, Phillips, Fawns, and Hayes (2002) argue that positioning theory might be a more appropriate medium for reflecting on the complexities of social episodes in professional learning. While this article does consider the professional setting, that consideration is squarely within the context of professional education, specifically nurse and midwifery education. The authors claim that positioning theory is a better reflective tool to aid in midwifery and nursing identity development, and the focus is more on using positioning theory to help acculturate students in the field of midwifery and nursing.

Similarly, Linehan and McCarthy (2000) explore how to better understand one's practice, specifically within primary and secondary education, partly via a positioning framework. They note that more modern approaches tend to consider people's engagement from one of two vantage points. The first is the notion that activity is largely self-organizing because it is influenced by a social context and by people who are inherently social beings. The second involves the idea that selfhood is discursively constructed, which is a component of positioning theory. Linehan and McCarthy assert that conventional views tend to treat these two ideas as incompatible, but they take the stance that they are not incompatible.

Linehan and McCarthy's (2000) study looks at participation in a primary classroom. They are concerned with distinguishing the gaps between normative practice and a differing practice that might have been displayed. They are also interested in the positions the teachers and students took during the classes and how students' acceptance of the teacher authority storyline constructively influences normative practice. Here, practice is a broad term used to describe a particular kind of community and includes both the learner and the teacher. Linehan and McCarthy (2000) discovered the underlying implication that positioning is influenced by and formed out of discursive spaces. They suggest that positioning theory may help to examine the changing and, at times, antagonistic nature of practice.

Some studies found that deeper understanding was a benefit of positioning theory (Barone, 2001). For instance, Barone (2001) uses positioning theory to reflect on prior research to gain richer insights regarding her research results. She looks at research data she collected over the course of four years of young school children who had been prenatally exposed to crack/cocaine. She was interested in seeing how these children adjusted to middle-class literacy expectations. She notices in her earlier writings that her representations of the participants within this research were fixed, as if they did not demonstrate any changes throughout the course of her study. She re-examined her data relating to one child in particular via a positioning theory framework to better represent the various positions that occurred as he adjusted to meet literacy expectations. Her study reveals contradictions relating to myths about how poor minorities view education and even myths about how the researcher is always in the position of power. She also gained a richer perspective of participants' life experiences.

Barone's study (2001) offers guidance for how the researcher can approach the analysis of the data in terms of his or her own biases and assumptions about the research and the research

participants. She was able to use positioning theory to challenge her own results from an earlier study, and this challenge led to deeper insights regarding the participants' lived experiences. Positioning theory will be used in my study to help me better understand the nature of the conflict and to make the positioning of the participants more explicit.

Positioning theory in corporate contexts.

Harre and Moghaddam's (2003) book, *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts*, helps lay the framework for how social interactions might be viewed in the context of this study. While they collaborate with various researchers to examine how positioning theory has or could be used within different contexts, they do not use it in the manner that I explore in this study. Boxer (2003) does look at assessing quality systems within organizations utilizing positioning theory; however, he is interested in how these organizations embrace quality systems in light of positioning theory. He does not appear to be as interested in disputes resulting from their interactions. Instead, Boxer explores positioning theory as a way of getting individuals to embrace an organizational program.

Boxer found positioning theory to be a useful tool in uncovering the causes of problems traced to underlying positions, speech acts, and storylines. He presents a case study of three painting companies that merged to form one painting company in order to address the need for a centralized marketing strategy. The company continued to act as three separate companies, which caused problems with employees adhering to certain policies and procedures. Boxer found that he was able to effectively analyze the causes of these problems via the lens of positioning theory. This potential to use positioning theory as an analytical tool for analyzing causes of problems is similar to my study, except that I am specifically interested in examining conflict within an organization. In this study I explore positioning theory as a lens for analyzing disputes

and suggest how positioning theory can be used to identify suitable resolutions or ways of handling conflict.

Bisel and Barge (2010) use positioning theory to examine planned change within organizations. More specifically, this study uses discourse analysis to look at how change messages within organizations position members to make certain interpretations and how these messages influence the identities individuals took on and the nature of their relationships with others. They argue that change messages contain both identity and relational messages simultaneously, which challenges the more conventional research that only considers the persuasive and informational content of the message.

The particular context Bisel and Barge (2010) chose for their research was a small healthcare and hospice organization comprised of registered nurses, clergy, physical therapists, and social workers. Twenty-five members of the hospice organization were randomly selected to participate in the study, and of those, 17 agreed to participate in the study. Data was collected via interviews, field notes, and observations. Bisel and Barge (2010) also collected survey data to determine job satisfaction.

During the interviews, the researchers engaged participants in a line of questioning aimed at determining a turning point for their experience within the organization. Participants consistently spoke of an event where the chair of the organization instituted a gag order after the executive director left the organization. The chair did not want the employees talking to the media about the sudden departure of the executive director or the current state of affairs within the organization. Bisel and Barge (2010) found that participants felt that this change message positioned them as untrustworthy and subordinate, whereas prior to the message members felt

more collegial, and felt that the organization was close-knit. This demonstrates the researchers' argument that change messages contain both identity and relational messages.

Bisel and Barge's study provides a textured perspective of the individual's experience within the health care organization. It provides, from the perspective of the participants, a picture of participants' experience and how they interpreted this experience. This dissertation research examines participants' experience; however, it does so with a slightly different focus and in a slightly different context of conflict within the corporate organization. Thus, this study's findings include a consideration of how participants position one another during conflict. Bisel and Barge (2010) limited their findings only to positioning and how positioning informed relationships and identity. In contrast, this study considers the complete positioning triad, which includes storylines, positions, and speech acts.

Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan (2009) also study organizational change; however, their focus is on storytelling during a time when an organization responsible for job placement was changing its technology. Whittle et al. (2009) collected data from interviews and field observations. They discovered three different storylines regarding the change process from the data collected from their field visit.

The first storyline positioned programmers as victims and heroes because they were subject to a new system that had a number of issues. By talking about their experience with the system, they positioned themselves as victims to the faults inherent within the new system, and they simultaneously positioned themselves as heroes for coping with the system and helping others to cope with the new system. A second storyline, told by the manager who was responsible for securing the new system, suggested that the programmers might have in fact been part of the problem. This manager suggested that the real issue was the attitude of programmers

towards the system, which contradicted the story the two programmers told about the new system. The last storyline played out during a trouble-shooting meeting where the programmers were able to reconcile their stories with the managers' stories by demonstrating to the manager the issues with the system.

This emphasis on storytelling within an organization demonstrates how individuals were able to interpret one event in multiple ways. It also considers the moral positioning participants assumed in taking up those storylines. While the Whittle et al. (2009) study took place during the time of the actual technology change, this current dissertation study occurred after the actual event, so responses were offered in retrospect, specifically emphasizing what individuals did to construct conflict by considering speech acts as well as storylines and positions.

Kure and Winslade (2010) examine conflict in organizations in a Danish health organization via a case study approach. Specifically, they look at the discursive actions in organizations and how those patterns of discourse shape conflict. Their study looks at whether these discursive practices could be used to mediate conflict within organizations. They distinguish between conflict in organizations and conflict between two parties. For Kure and Winslade (2010), conflict between two parties involves polarizing discursive practices, whereas conflict in organizations contains patterns of positioning practices that marginalize individuals and groups throughout the organization. With this distinction in mind, they examine the different discourses present in the health care organization.

Kure and Winslade (2010) found two discourses present within the health organization. One particular discourse was that of professional equality, where members of the organization engaged in a type of talk that demonstrated they regarded one another as professional equals. This discourse influenced the team's behavior in that patient diagnosis was often opened across

functions. Team members also tended to offer their perspectives in a reflective manner, leaving room to consider alternative perspectives.

Since the professional equality talk was the predominate discourse used in the organization, alternative discourses were then marginalized. This created a discursive hierarchy that held the potential for negatively impacting those who did not take up the dominant discourse. For instance, when individuals used a discourse of subject matter expert, they risked being viewed from a negative perspective by those who took up the dominant discourse. Kure and Winslade (2010) suggest an approach to deconstruct these discursive hierarchies and mediate conflict within organizations, which involves speaking in a way that makes a distinction between the problem and the individuals and building new discourses within the organization.

The premise of the Kure and Winslade (2010) study is very similar to my own, although they only mention positioning theory as part of the theoretical framework, in addition to other discourse theories. Positioning theory is not the central theory proposed within their studies. They also looked at conflict within organizations, but were more concerned with conflict at the organizational level than the interpersonal level. As previously discussed, they argue that certain discourses establish discursive hierarchies. They then propose an approach for deconstructing these hierarchies. In contrast to Kure and Winslade (2010), this study will focus more on the interpersonal level via consideration of the complete positioning triad and will provide a more explicit consideration of conflict using positioning theory.

Wallace (2001) uses positioning theory to explore power relations in the workplace in her case study, but this exploration is more about how women's professional opportunities are limited within the workplace based on their positioning. She examines how management practices position women workers and how management's talk about training is tied to discourse

that positions women in organizations. Wallace (2001) notes that the work assigned to women within organizations tends to be talked about in undervalued terms and detached from career-advancing opportunities, whereas work performed by men is regarded as career oriented. This talk positions women differently than men so women were not able to fully participate in career development opportunities.

Although the Wallace (2001) study does not focus on conflict, this particular study highlights the importance of looking at what opportunities participants in my research felt were available to them based on how they were positioned discursively. While Wallace (2001) does not specifically reference positioning theory as part of her theoretical and analytical framework, she does consider how the discursive practices within the organization positioned women, which is arguably a feature of positioning theory. Instead, of relating this to positioning theory, however, she relates this to a feminist theory.

Harre and Slocum's (2003) work served as the impetus for this study. They use positioning theory to analyze a dispute between Georgetown University and the local community and found six storylines prevalent in the dispute. They notice that these storylines not only described the conflict but also perpetuated it to some extent. Their analysis, accomplished through positioning theory, ultimately led to better relationships between the university and the surrounding community by getting both sides to construct and hold different and more positive storylines.

Harre and Slocum (2003) suggest a structure that includes first identifying people's perspectives regarding the nature of the conflict by trying to understand what participants perceive the conflict to be about, what the primary issues are, and what they hope to gain in both

the long and short term. They then suggest that the next step is to analyze these perspectives. The goal of this level of analysis is to identify positions, speech acts, and storylines.

In conclusion, there is still much to learn about the application of positioning theory in the organizational setting, particularly within the context of examining conflict. There have been many studies within the academic setting, including studies that help to explain how learning environments are shaped, studies that describe participation, studies that considered implications for researchers, and studies that argue for the use of positioning theory as a transformative learning tool. Studies that have occurred in corporate contexts have not considered using positioning theory as an analytical tool for understanding conflicts. However, Harre and Slocum's (2003) study provides a promising look at conflict in organizations, which serves as part of the analysis process for this study. The specific process used for this study will be further described in chapter three.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study is to explore how positioning theory might be used in an analysis of the assumptions of individuals engaged in a conflict within an organizational setting. The research question asks what storylines, positions, and speech acts are evident in participants' stories of conflict within the context of a recent reorganization within a company. This chapter begins by describing the research design, including the specific methodology selected for this study, which is followed by a description of context and participants. Next the process for collecting and analyzing data is discussed, followed by a consideration of the trustworthiness of the study. The final two sections address negotiation and risks and are included due to their relevance to the specific research method selected.

Research Design

A narrative research approach was used to conduct this study. Narrative can be described as a methodical approach to inquiry that allows the researcher to investigate an individual's account of an experience or event (Creswell, 2007). Stories of how individuals have experienced conflict within a given context can shed light on understanding conflict from an organizational development perspective. Webster and Mertova (2007) further explain that "narrative inquiry is set in human stories" (p. 3). The critical events narrative approach allows the researcher to better understand the complexities of human experience. I use the critical events narrative inquiry in an effort to better understand the research participants' positions, storylines, and speech acts in conflicts in a large organization. The next section describes the context and the research participants.

Context and participants

I work for a large corporate organization, Utico[1], located in the United States. Utico has a number of departments, including the Alternative Resources division. Specifically, I worked with Acquisitions, an organization that supported the Alternative Resources division. The large majority of workers at these sites are craft and technical employees, and the average age of the workforce is 46.7. In my experience, employees are quite diverse geographically, ethnically, racially, and generationally. The educational background of the workers can be quite diverse as well. Most have high school diplomas or a GED equivalent; however, a few individuals do have undergraduate and graduate degrees. This is true for the participants in this study as well.

I recruited participants from a particular workgroup within my place of employment. At one time I performed consultative services for this workgroup, which supported the Alternative Resources division by securing material, goods, and services. I have never had any authority over these employees; however, my opinions were respected and sought after when I worked closely with them because my professional duties involved assisting managers in interpreting and implementing policy. I also served as a confidant to them and helped them to sort through disagreements with each other and their employees. I invited the managers from this workgroup to participate in the research because I witnessed and refereed many of their conflicts that stemmed from a reorganization that occurred in the summer of 2008.

[1]Pseudonyms have been used to replace names, locations, and job positions to protect the anonymity of the research participants.

This restructuring of the company involved removing the Acquisitions function from three sites in three separate cities to a central location. This meant that some employees had to physically move their homes and families to a new city. It also included reclassifying certain union-represented positions to non-represented positions. Management and employees were affected in that they had to adjust to their new locations, work responsibilities, and working relationships.

This study's participants were primarily spread out over five locations: Harris City, Robertson, Cherokee Bend, Little Foot, and Wakeland Falls. All the acquisition agents at the Alternative Resources sites were relocated to Harris City. This site is viewed as a corporate location and is also where most of the upper-level management in the organization resides.

Robertson was most impacted by the centralization because it is more than two hours south of Harris City, meaning employees from this site had to physically move their personal residence to comply with the centralization. Three employees from this site moved to the centralized location, three other employees applied for and accepted new positions as Resource Control Coordinators (RCC) at Robertson so that they could remain there, and two employees retired in lieu of accepting the position in Harris City.

Cherokee Bend is less than 50 miles from, and therefore closest to, Harris City. The acquisition agents who moved to the centralized location already lived in the city, so they only had to move their offices. All of the acquisition agents from this site accepted the positions in Harris City.

The final city affected by the centralization was Little Foot. This city is a little over 50 miles from Harris City. Two acquisition agents from this site accepted positions in Harris City, but both acquisition agents already lived in Harris City so this required no residential move. Two

acquisition agents applied for and were selected as RCCs in Harris City. One of the managers at this site also was selected to manage the buying function in Harris City.

Wakeland Falls was not impacted by the centralization; however, it is mentioned here because the manager who supervised the centralized acquisition agents lived in Wakeland Falls. This city is about 50 miles east of Little Foot, which meant the manager had to physically move his family and residence to Harris City. The manager referenced conflict relating to this move.

I obtained permission from Utico to conduct the study pending an agreement to only interview management employees since the other employees were represented and would require union approval. Per that agreement, only the workgroup managers were invited to participate in this study. Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Tennessee was also received to conduct this study (see approval letter in Appendix A).

Six managers were invited to participate, including site managers of each of the four affected sites, the manager of the centralized site, and the manager of the entire division. One site manager never responded to my invitation so I invited the manager at the site that was most affected by the centralization to participate. Another site manager verbally agreed to participate but never responded to my attempts to schedule the initial interview. For this reason, only five managers participated in the study. They are Mary, Rick, Sam, Bob, and Mark. Table 1 shows the participants and the roles they held prior to and after the centralization.

Table 1

Participants and Their Roles Pre and Post Centralization

Name	**Pre-centralization Role**	**Post-Centralization Role**
Mary	Managed Alternative Resources Acquisitions division	Managed Alternative Resources Acquisitions division
Rick	Supervised acquisition agents at Little Foot	Supervised centralized acquisition agents in Harris City
Sam	Acquisition agent at Robertson	Acquisition agent at Harris City and Manager of RCCs at Robertson
Bob	Manager of Acquisitions at Robertson	Manager of Special Unit Project at Little Foot
Mark	RCC	Manager of RCCs and Manager of Acquisitions at Robertson

These individuals are diverse in terms of race, age, and gender. The educational levels and supervisory experience of these participants also vary. Participants range in age from 30 to early 60s, and only two are college graduates. Since directly linking demographic information to the participants could identify the individuals, it is not included here in an effort to assure their anonymity. More information about each of these research participants will be provided in chapter four.

The next section will describe the specific narrative approach that was used for this study. Following Webster and Mertova's (2007) critical events narrative approach, this will include four components: process, negotiation, risk, and results.

Process

Process includes the research tools that were used to collect data. It also refers to the method for analyzing and indexing data. To better describe these processes, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness will be discussed next.

Data collection.

Interview data was collected from each of the participants, which provided the necessary narrative data to populate the positioning triangle and answer the research question. Narratives collected through interviews were analyzed for evidence of the rights and duties that individuals believed they possessed (positions), the types of specific actions that occurred in their interactions (speech acts and other actions), and patterns of interaction (storylines).

As suggested by Webster and Mertova (2007), the interview questions were open-ended to engage the research participants in storytelling (see Appendix B). Additionally, the structure of the research questions encouraged reflection in that they required the participants to recall or think back on their experiences since the reorganization. Participants were encouraged to give a detailed description of time, place, and events in their stories to accomplish structure.

I conducted a pilot interview to practice my interviewing skills and to determine whether the questions in my interview protocol were appropriate. The pilot interview was conducted with a coworker who had been through a similar research experience in her own pursuit of her doctoral degree. I also asked another coworker with a doctorate to observe the interview and asked both individuals to provide me with feedback. As a result of this pilot, I felt the interview questions were appropriate; however, I adjusted my interviewing technique by listening more, rather than interrupting as the participant answered.

Since the supervisors' time was limited due to work demands, each interview was scheduled for no longer than two hours. I was prepared to reschedule if the supervisor needed to respond to an emergent issue during the interview, but each manager was able to complete the interview with no interruptions. The locations for the interviews were chosen by the supervisor. Since the supervisors are geographically dispersed, I traveled to each supervisor's work location in most cases, with the exception of Bob. Bob met me at my work location since he had a meeting in my building and it was a convenient time for him to meet.

I recorded and transcribed each participant's interview. Line numbering was used to aid in coding and indexing the data. An indexing system using pseudonyms, line numbers, and codes assisted me in further analyzing the data.

Critical events analysis.

In qualitative research, data analysis is inductive. As Bogdan and Bilken (2006) suggest, "the direction you will travel comes after you have been collecting the data" (p. 6). Bogdan and Bilken (2006) note that the exact methods used in qualitative research typically emerge once the data is obtained; accordingly, the data analysis techniques described in the following sections evolved over the course of the study as described below. Figure 1 illustrates the initial plan for the data analysis.

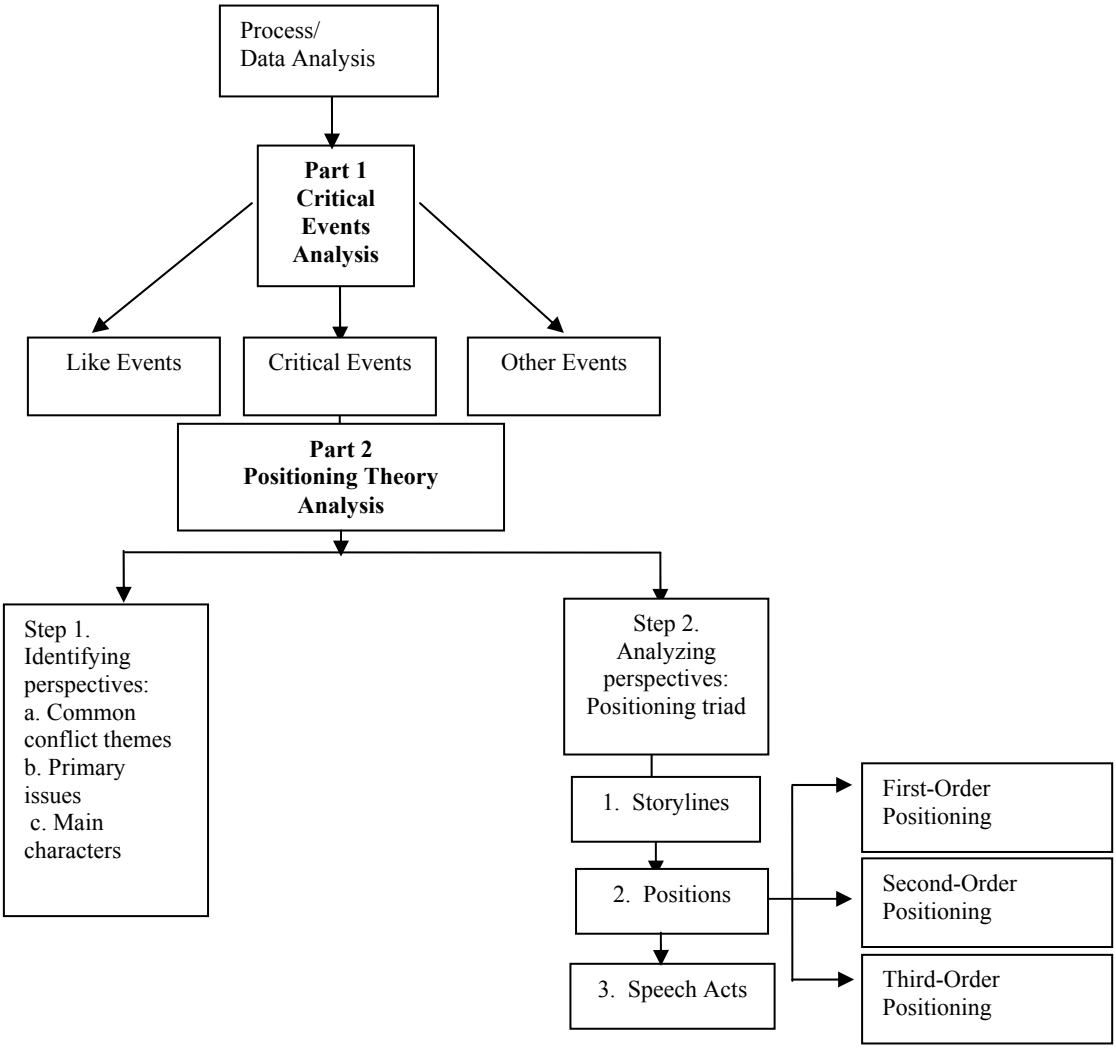

*Figure 1.*Original plan for data analysis (from Ghosten's dissertation proposal, 2009), which depicts that only critical events would be analyzed using positioning theory

The data analysis occurred in two parts. Part 1 was the critical events analysis and part 2 was the positioning theory analysis. In part 1 the transcripts were analyzed to determine which events during the course of the reorganization were most critical using the framework provided

by Webster and Mertova (2007). Stories were placed into three categories: critical events, like events, and other.

Webster and Mertova (2007) identify the following three conditions as key features of critical events: when the event 1) impacts the performance of the storyteller, 2) changes the storyteller in some way, and 3) has a significant impact on the storyteller. Stories falling into the critical events category can be thought of as those events that participants talk about the most. Given that all employees within the organization had to radically change the way they did business and even relocate, I felt the reorganization could potentially meet the criteria of a critical event. However, it should be noted that whether or not the reorganization is a critical event ultimately lies within the perspective of the research participant (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Thus, the final conclusion could only be reached after conducting the study and negotiating the process of the critical events model, which is what led to the critical events identified in chapter four.

Like events tend to mimic the critical events in context, techniques, and resources; however, the characters in the stories may be different. For the purpose of this study, like events were those that further reinforced or explained the critical events. The category of other events involves anecdotal information. Identifying like and other events also helped establish the trustworthiness of the study because these categories tended to confirm critical events.

In order to categorize the events, I read the interview transcripts multiple times. After reading the first transcript, I decided that the initial reading should be done while listening to the audiotapes of the interviews. I then coded segments of the transcript that met the criteria of a critical event with the letter “C.” Like events were coded with the letter “L” and other events were coded with the letter “O.”

Each critical event was coded sequentially based on the order it appeared in the transcript to distinguish one event from another. For instance, the first critical event was coded as C1, the second was coded as C2, and so on. I documented the analysis by noting the line numbers and main characters for each critical event. I identified like events and other events in a similar manner. Since like events and other events are similar to the critical events and help to define critical events, they were given a number aligned with the critical events. Lowercase letters were further assigned in descending order to like events or other events since there were multiple events that were linked to a particular critical event. For example, L1a would be the first like event related to the first critical event (C1). L1b would be the second like event related to C1. Similarly, O1a would be the first other event related to the first critical event (C1) and so on (see Table 2).

Table 2

Coding Scheme for Critical Events Analysis

Critical Event	**Like Event**	**Other Event**
C1	L1a L1b L1c	O1a O1b O1c
C2	L2a L2b L2c	O1a O2b O2c

The initial plan was to use this initial analysis to narrow the scope of subsequent analysis. However, the like events and other events contained information important to understanding

conflict. I noticed that not all participants described their experiences in a way that technically met the criteria for a critical event according to Webster and Mertova's condition that critical events result in change. For those who did describe their experiences in a way that suggested a critical event, their stories were not limited to one specific part of the interview. The critical event was pervasive throughout the data so analyzing the interview in its entirety seemed most appropriate. As a result, the analysis plan was amended to include a consideration of like and other events, as well as critical events.

In part 2, I analyzed the entire transcripts according to positioning theory, drawing upon the work of Harre and Slocum (2003), who identify a three-step analytical process:

1. *Identifying* people's perspective of the nature of the conflict

A. primary issues

B. main characters

C. common themes

2. *Analyzing* people's perspective of the conflict (positioning triad)

A. storylines

B. positions

C. speech acts

3. *Allowing* others to adopt a position.

The first two steps in the analysis were used because these areas focus on understanding the underlying nature of the conflict. The third phase is not as important to this study because it involves deliberately bringing the participants together to adopt new positions to resolve conflict, which I did not do. The entire final data analysis is depicted in Figure 2.

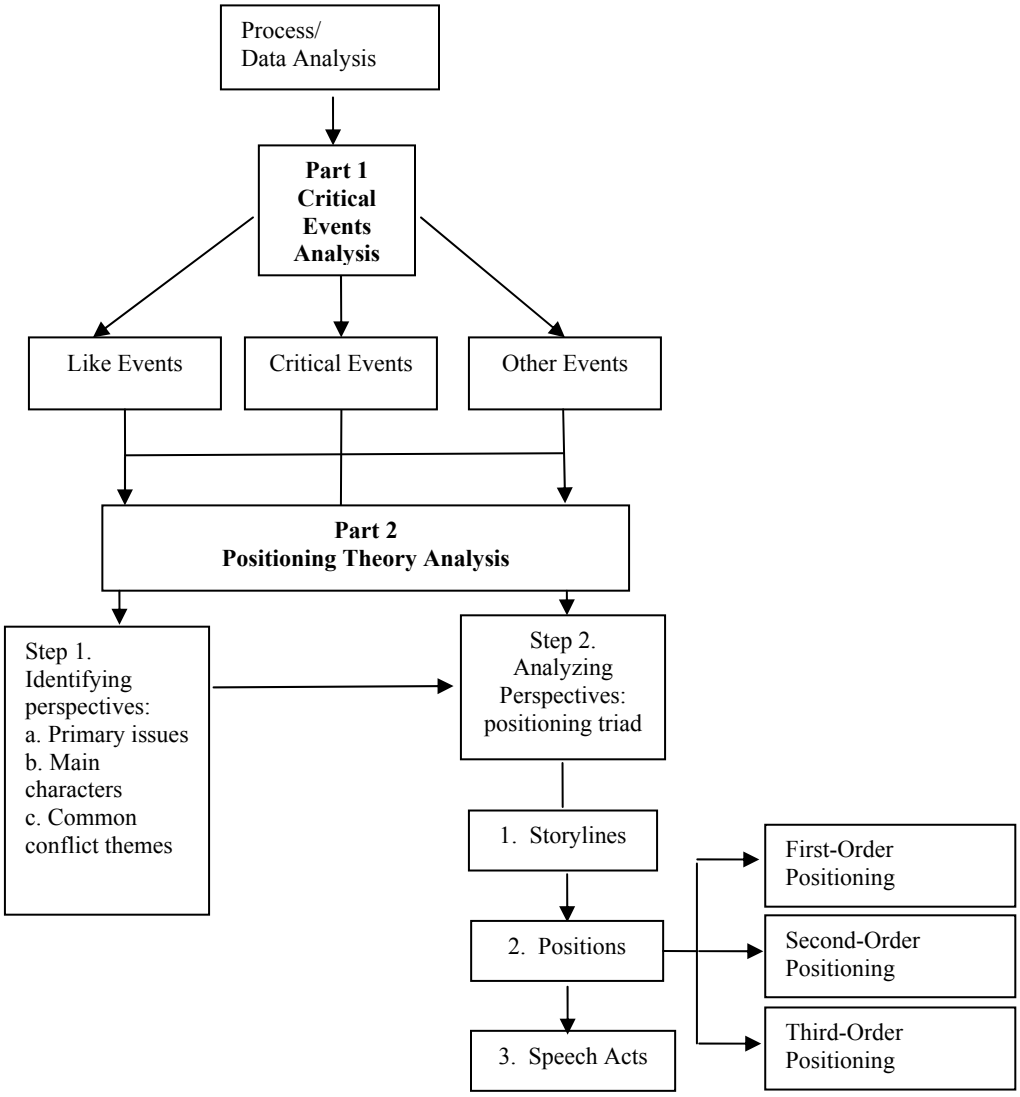

Figure 2. Final data analysis procedure, which depicts that like and other events, in addition to critical events, would be analyzed using positioning theory.

Step 1: Identifying perspectives.

Part 2 of the data analysis involved two steps. The first step of Harre and Slocum's (2003) framework requires the researcher to identify the nature of the conflict by figuring out the

primary issues relating to the conflict. It also means identifying the main cast of characters and their relevance. The researcher must note the different goals of the participants by identifying common themes (For the purpose of this study, I identified common themes related to conflict). This helps determine the boundaries for the definition of conflict. Much of this information was obtained during the critical events analysis.

First, common conflict themes were determined based on the underlying topic of the critical, like, or other events. Next, I identified main characters for each event by documenting who was referenced in each event. In some instances, specific people were referenced, and in other instances the interview participant seemed to be referencing a group of people rather than one particular individual. I developed a four-column table to keep track of how this information was related. The first column contained the type of event (e.g. critical, like, and other events), the second column contained the common conflict themes, the third column contained the line number in the transcript for each event, and the fourth contained the main characters (see example in Table 3).

Table 3

Example of an Analysis Map for Part 2, Step 1

Code Type	**Theme**	**Line Numbers**	**Main Characters**
C1- Bringing Ideas to Management	Support For or Against the Centralization	132-142, 186-194, 164-170	Rick & Corporate Management
C2 - Taking on Leadership of Centralized Group	Operating in New Roles	203-211	Rick & Acquisition Agents
L2 - Motivating Employees	Operating in New Roles	339-343	Rick & Acquisition Agents
L2b - Working with Acquisition Agent on Scheduling	Operating in New Roles	345-359	Rick & Susan
L2c - Recognizing Agents' Contributions	Operating in New Roles	366-377	Rick & Rhonda
Primary Issues • The manager is grappling with leading the centralized group, which involves managing people who are older than he is and who question his experience. He is looking for ways to earn their trust and gain their respect. • He also believes he is being undermined by his peers. • Part of his task as manager of this group is to develop consistent processes and a consistent approach to their work since the acquisition agents used different processes when they were at their different locations.			

After reviewing each transcript for themes and main characters, I identified primary issues for each interview participant. Primary issues consisted of a summary of the entire transcript and were not related to any specific event or line number. They were noted separately in the coding index for each participant.

Step 2: Analyzing perspectives.

The second step of part 2 of the data analysis identified participant perspectives, which was done via the positioning triad. As Harre and Slocum (2003) suggest, "This includes not only the events that occur (actions) but the meaning that these are given (acts)" (p. 131). According to

Harre and Moghaddam (2003), entering the analysis at the storylines helps to make the other vertices more apparent.

Storylines are described by Harre and Moghaddam as "established patterns of development" (p. 6). I followed Harre and Slocum's (2003) advice and began by identifying the storyline. I highlighted specific sections where the storylines seemed most apparent and then noted the line numbers.

Once I identified the storylines, I reviewed each storyline to determine first, second, and third-order positions. First-order positioning can be thought of as the initial negotiation of rights, duties, and roles between two or more individuals engaged in some sort of exchange. Second-order, then, is when one individual challenges that initial positioning, whether by his or her actions or manner of speech. Essentially, second-order contradicts the presumption of how that individual was initially positioned. Third-order positioning is a continued negotiation of those rights, duties, and roles of the individuals that occur outside of the initial exchange, perhaps even with third parties. I re-read each participant's entire transcript for a third time to determine if there were any positions that could be noted in other places within the transcript. I then noted line numbers for the positions.

Finally, I analyzed the transcripts for speech acts, dividing the acts into illocutionary and perlocutionary forces and noting the line numbers. The illocutionary force is the initiating discursive act. For instance, the announcement of the centralization was one example of the illocutionary force. The perlocutionary force is what happens as a result of the initial statement. The fact that the organization did centralize was a response to the illocutionary force. I assigned the perlocutionary force a number that corresponds to the illocutionary force, and since there seemed to be multiple perlocutionary forces for one illocutionary force, the perlocutionary forces

were also assigned a letter to distinguish one from another. For example, perlocutionary force 1a is related to illocutionary force 1. Additionally, perlocutionary forces 1b, 1c, 1d, and so on, would also be related to illocutionary force 1. An example of the analysis map used to document the step 2 analysis is in Table 4.

Table 4

Example of an Analysis Map for Part 2, Step 2.

Storylines	**Positioning**	**Speech Acts**
Supervisor v. Subordinate (32-37, 182-185, 192-196, 241-242, 244-248, 250-251) Conflict 1	**Micromanagement example** 1st order—Jason positions himself as one who has the right and authority to question Sam about what he was working on. 2nd order—Sam challenges this by pushing back on Jason (244-248). **Related to Sam's feelings about Bob** 1st order—Sam once regarded his manager as a co-worker, which has a more collegial connotation. 3rd order—In this account, the transfer challenges the 1st order position so Sam now regards Bob as his manager/supervisor, one who has the authority and right to force him to go to Harris City (182-185, 192-196).	**Illocutionary force 5**—Sam and others are asked by management to do analyst work and acquisitions (251). **Perlocutionary force 5a**—Acquisition Agents feel harassed and mistreated (250-251).

Trustworthiness.

Webster and Mertova (2007) suggest that "the trustworthiness of the narrative research lies in the confirmation by the participants of their reported stories of experience" (p. 99). To confirm the stories and my interpretation of these stories, I spoke separately with all participants for approximately 45 minutes and provided each with a hardcopy of their transcript. I then reviewed my account of the critical events findings, conflict themes, primary issues, and

storylines. I also highlighted certain portions of their transcript that led to these interpretations. The participants confirmed my interpretation of their interviews and in some instances provided more commentary that affirmed the interpretation.

Webster and Mertova (2007) also suggest that the researcher's perspective is as valid as the participants and that the data should resonate with him or her. As the HR consultant at the time of the centralization, I had the opportunity to counsel these individuals through many of their conflicts and address their questions. This intimate knowledge of the issues managers encountered did impact the analysis. For instance, this knowledge informed how storylines were identified because there were times when I was familiar with a particular incident the supervisor shared during the interview. I relied on this knowledge to provide context when identifying the storylines. My interpretations were then taken to and confirmed by the participants.

Negotiation

The second key component of Webster and Mertova's critical events research methodology is negotiation. This involves considering the relationship between the researcher and the research participants during the research. As previously stated, prior to the start of this study I consulted with the supervisors on a regular basis in matters of policy during the time of the reorganization. Since I had no authority over them in a supervisory capacity, the nature of our relationship was largely cooperative and collegial. Specifically, I advised Mary on the technical aspects of the reorganization and centralization. I explained how the centralization should work according to the collective bargaining agreement, which is the contract that governs the conduct between management and represented employees. I prepared the transfer notice for the acquisition agents, developed job descriptions for the new RCC positions, and posted the jobs on the online company bulletin board. I prepared talking points for the managers to use so that the

centralization could be announced consistently at the same time at the three sites. I attended the meeting at Robertson since the management team and I determined that this would be the most affected site. I also helped respond to questions after the centralization was initially announced.

After the centralization was announced, I helped prepare the selections matrix and interview questions for the RCC positions. I worked with the managers of all the sites and Harris City to distinguish work responsibilities between the acquisition agents and the RCCs. I also assisted these managers with dealing with disputes between their acquisition agents and each other.

In situations like the centralization, my responsibilities were to represent management, so my interactions with the acquisition agents were limited. They looked to their union representative for consultation and support, although they did contact me to answer questions related to their move. I primarily responded to their questions about the transfer notice, the RCC positions, and their relocation package.

During the time of this study, I was in a different role in my workplace and no longer worked directly with that organization; however, my relationship with most of the management team was still very collegial. The managers at Cherokee Bend and Little Foot were more responsive when I worked in my previous role. These two managers, however, did not respond to my invitation to participate in the study. The other managers still seemed to show me a certain level of respect because they shared information with me freely since I was already aware of many of the issues surrounding the centralization and was still involved in helping their new human resource consultant learn about the details of the centralization. Interestingly, I was more collegial with Sam during the study than during the centralization. It should be noted that we both were in different roles during the study. He was an acquisition agent when the centralization

took place and became manager of the RCCs a few months after. At the time of the study, he was retired but was working back with the company as a contractor. He seemed to hold no animosity or resentment against me, despite my role in the centralization, and agreed without reservation to participate in the research.

Risks

The third component, risks, was determined in consideration of intersubjectivity. Mitigating risks included protecting participants' identity, determining the most appropriate time and location to meet, easing participants' concerns about the interview and the subject of the study, and effectively representing participants' perspectives. The primary strategy for reducing risks inherent in the research was by obtaining IRB approval prior to conducting the study. This required me to obtain participants' consent to participate in the study, which assured the participants that their identities would be protected by using pseudonyms and providing only aggregated demographic data. I also considered external constraints affecting the research, including competing demands facing the participants. To mitigate this, I negotiated and coordinated interviews in consideration of the participants' workloads and work schedules.

Another risk was smoothing, which is when participants appear to censor their stories in the interview. Webster and Mertova (2007) explain that research participants might do this in fear of how they think they might be perceived or represented. At least one research participant, Bob, appeared to engage in smoothing. For instance, Bob appeared reluctant to speak about the specifics of a particular conflict even though he indicated that there were a number of conflicts following the centralization. He also seemed to downplay the sometimes antagonistic relationship between corporate management and site management. Interviewing other participants and obtaining multiple perspectives helped to make Bob's apparent smoothing more

noticeable. To counteract any potential smoothing, I attempted to put participant concerns at ease at the very outset of the study. I did this by clearly stating in the informed consent document that the participants' identity would be protected. I stressed that the purpose of the research was not to place blame on anyone but to better understand possible causes of conflict using positioning theory.

Another risk was using a group for the study with which I had a previous working relationship. Because this group was chosen due to the open access to information that I enjoyed, I make no claims to objectivity. I was fully aware of many issues surrounding the reorganization. Many of the participants contacted me when they were engaged in conflict with a peer or an employee, and I was involved in disciplinary discussions with their employees. I also represented them during all grievances union employees filed against management. Even Sam, who was initially an acquisition agent at the time of the centralization, contacted me when he had questions about his move, so I had an idea about his feelings about the centralization. This awareness undoubtedly influenced the way that I interpreted the data, which is why the participants' perspectives of my interpretation were important. To address this potential issue, I reviewed my interpretation of the portion of the data that related specifically to a given participant with him or her.

Risks can further be thought of in terms of philosophical assumptions, covered in chapter one as part of the theoretical framework. By explicitly discussing these areas, due regard can be given to their potential impact.

Chapter IV

Findings

Chapter four reports the findings from each level of analysis, following the same sequence in which the analysis was conducted. Beginning with the critical events analysis, findings around the two individuals who spoke of the experience in terms of a critical event are discussed. Next, primary issues and main characters for each participant are identified. Common conflict themes are also explored. Finally, the positioning triads for conflicts within each theme are identified.

Critical Events Findings

Part 1 of the data analysis began with the critical events analysis. Critical events, as defined by Webster and Mertova (2007), were prevalent among two research participants. Webster and Mertova define a critical event as one in which the participant's perspective and or actions need to change in some way. In fact, there were only two participants, Rick and Sam, who seemed to speak of their experience in terms of change. Rick spoke of his experience in more positive terms, whereas Sam spoke of his experience in a very negative way. While the centralization was significant, the other research participants did not overtly express that the experience had changed their actions or perspectives in any way. Rick and Sam's critical events will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the findings of the critical events analysis across participants.

Rick's critical events.

There were three critical events identified for Rick, which are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Summary of Rick's Critical Events

List of Critical Events
• Rick began to see himself as a peer with members of corporate management • Rick adapted his management style to deal with peers who resented his selection as manager of the centralized group • Rick adapted his management style to lead the centralized function

As previously noted in chapter three, Rick was the manager of the centralized group. As with all participants, I asked him to describe an experience that stood out to him during the centralization. When I asked that question, Rick talked about his involvement in the decision to centralize. He shared that he was asked to go around to the various sites to research the acquisitions process prior to the centralization. Rick looked at order intake, how orders were processed, how technical information necessary for the order was identified, and how the agents interfaced with others to process the order. He commented that this assignment matched his undergraduate studies in process authorization. Rick believed that his preliminary work ultimately established the model for how the centralization would work, which can be seen in the following statement:

> Um, I guess there was a question as to whether if we were centralized whether we would be able to function versus being at the sites. Through, I guess you would say my research, it was kind of the, uh, initiation before they brought the consultants in to say it would work.

The statement above is important because it describes Rick's involvement in the centralization, demonstrating that he was an active participant in shaping how the centralization would be structured. Later in the interview he explained that he went to all three sites and spoke to the acquisition agents to get a sense of how they approached their work and the processes they used. He then presented his recommendation for the centralization to management. According to Rick, his work preceded the recommendation of external "consultants," so he saw management's decision as acceptance of his idea.

The fact that management accepted his idea made Rick feel that his ideas and opinions were valued and respected. Additionally, senior management made him the manager of the centralized team, which for him was another indication that management had begun to embrace him as a colleague. As a result of his involvement, he said his own point of view about his role in the organization changed. This is the first critical event noted for Rick and is captured in the following quote:

> It's helped, it's, it's helped, um, my perspective has evolved where um, you're more in the bug dust and actually doing the work at the site and you're really not able to see the big picture. Now as we do work, you know, usually over a, period of time, I'm more apt now to talk to my manager about this, how we can do it as an organization, more so, other than this is how my group should do it, we need to look at how we do it across [Acquisitions].

Rick mentioned that his perspective evolved as a result of the experience because he moved from dealing with "bug dust" details to being a person who could bring his ideas directly to management. In fact, it was because they acted upon his ideas for the centralization that Rick felt

free to present his ideas to management. He began to view himself more as a peer, which was further reinforced by the fact that he was asked to manage the centralized group.

Rick's experience as the supervisor of the centralized group served as the second critical event in his interview because he adapted his management style to deal with the demands of the new positions. As the supervisor, he faced conflict with the other site supervisors and employees who would be reporting to him. He also shared that other employees were not aware of his educational background or previous work experience in the Acquisitions organization or because he had only been working at the sites for about ten months. They thought he was a relatively new employee and resented that he was made the manager of the group. He was also younger than the other supervisors and most of the employees who would be working for him.

Rick expressed that even he was surprised that he was selected as the manager over the centralized group because there were others who had considerably more experience than he had. He had resigned himself to thinking he would report to one of the other supervisors, but instead he became the supervisor. Rick noted that the other supervisors were not as intimately involved in the centralization as he had been and hinted that they resented him for it, saying they gave him a hard time. His employees told him that the other managers called to check up on him. Rick also felt that some of the managers magnified small issues that existed prior to the centralization:

> Once centralized, those same issues became a big deal now that [loud noise] now that I owned it. So any time a, they weren't big deals at the sites so it would be as simple as something, um, not receiving a folder or not receiving an email. They would take that and would send it to my manager and say, 'I sent Rick an email 10 minutes ago. He hadn't responded.' Or 'One of Rick's employees is being disrespectful. We need to do something about it.' But these same individuals worked for them a week ago. Same

> issues, but now it's mine, they had no problems sharing that issue with management. So, um, it was another source of conflict if you will.

In the description above, Rick felt these managers were holding him accountable for issues they previously overlooked in the past. This additional pressure from the site managers presented another challenge for Rick in managing the centralized site, which led to conflict.

Through this experience, Rick's management style began to evolve. He had to learn ways to deal with his peers who worked at the sites. The problems he described were a new experience for him, and he had not been challenged to that extent previously in his management style. He also wanted the centralization to be successful so he enlisted the support of others:

> Um, initially it was quite bothersome but ultimately through the advice of some mentors, um, found a very professional way to respond. If there was an issue, uh, address the issue [loud noise]. Sorry, address the issue and communicate with the complainant if you will of what I did and just. Uh, you know, the personal part of it, I tried to just discard, look away from, and just handle the issue as professional as I could.

Rick sought the advice of mentors because he found his peers' behavior to be frustrating. He took some of the actions of his peers personally in the beginning; however, his mentors encouraged him to remain professional.

Rick also had a number of employees who were not "pleased" about the centralization, so he had to learn how to keep them motivated. He knew he was dealing with some employees who did not want to move because they liked their site and their manager. They were not as accepting of the change as Rick. He also had the challenging task of bringing together employees from different workgroups together in one group. These employees had different processes, different communication styles, and different work habits. It was Rick's job to deal with all these issues

and to create one cohesive group. To complicate matters further, Rick felt pressure to make sure the centralized group could begin work once centralized. There would be very little time to get acclimated to the new working conditions because they would need to be ready to support their customers immediately. In order to deal with these challenges, he researched how to best motivate his employees by reading management books and talking to their former supervisors. He describes his efforts below:

> Well, um, I did my best to manage the conflict. Read books. Talked to folks. Talked to the managers, um, that managed those employees before. Tell me something about them just to understand their, this position, their attitude, personalities, and how to best, most effectively, um, manage the individual. Um, there, the folks were from varying backgrounds.

His concern was for the success of the centralization. He felt he needed to understand how to motivate his employees who were diverse in terms of skill and experience. Rick talked about the challenge of motivating a group with such varied interests:

> So, it was key that to, understand what motivated the individuals. And it was different for everybody. Some folks were motivated by just their manager showing up. Some folks you have to sit and understand their personal issues. Uh, it was just a host of things that I had to, at the time 16 or so people. Just finding how to motivate 16 different individuals in 16 different ways.

Rick grappled with how to motivate these individuals. He recognized the uniqueness of the individuals and realized that motivation would look different for all of them so he needed to come up with different approaches.

Rick described one specific experience where he dealt with an employee who he discovered felt overlooked. This was an employee who was very experienced in her role. She was one of his most senior employees so he needed her support and cooperation on the team. Rick met with this employee to determine what her reservations were regarding working with the group. During this meeting, she opened up about her concerns:

> She said, um, 'In my career in 30 plus years, you know, the carrot has been dangled in front of me but I've never been given any type of leadership position. I'm just tired of it.' And you know that type of thing and um, just at that time, it was clear to me that she just wanted someone to notice her work, appreciate her work, and give her an opportunity.

This was a long-term employee who felt she had been overlooked and even led on by the organization, leading her to express her frustration to Rick. Rick felt that motivating her would involve making certain opportunities available to her.

Rick was able to effectively deal with the employees' issues and work towards a resolution. This incident also serves as an example of a challenge that Rick did not experience in the role he held prior to the centralization. He had to learn new motivational skills to be successful as the centralized manager. Rick was highly motivated to do this because he was intimately connected to this centralization, as he believed the decision to centralize stemmed from his research and recommendation.

Sam's critical events.

Sam's experience seems to be in direct contrast to Rick's. He was once an acquisition agent during the centralization before moving into management. One critical event can be identified from his transcript: the centralization itself. The centralization process was totally disruptive to Sam's life. He felt he had no choice and was forced to move to Harris City. He also

felt that some of the details of the centralization were unfair. One such detail was the reimbursement for house-hunting expenses. Since he was only allowed two days for his house-hunting trip, the maximum reimbursement he could get for either day would only be at 75% of the per diems set for Harris City:

> I took the forced transfer to [Harris City]. Went up there and spent, had to, had to be there by the 21st. The notification was sent out in late May. We had to decide what we going to do. Get the house hunting, which by the way was 2 days. [Utico's] guidelines, that was the first and the last day. You don't get 100%. You only get 75% so we got 75% of our house hunting expenses. Bitter (laughs).

Sam explained that one of the reasons he felt bitter was because of the way the house hunting was handled, but this was only one reason for his bitterness. According to Sam, he was bitter about the entire process. He discussed the amount of time he had to decide whether or not he would accept the centralization. He also did not receive additional compensation for centralizing. These sentiments are expressed in the following quote:

> I felt like it was way too sudden. We didn't have enough time to think about what we were going to do. While there was added, uh, responsibilities, responsibilities to these positions that were offered, there was no more money. If you chose to go to [Harris City], there was no more money. If you chose to go home, which some of us couldn't, enough said. (Laughs) But I was bitter about the whole process.

For Sam, the centralization represented a huge inconvenience. The process happened too quickly, and his salary was not increased, though his responsibilities were. He felt cornered by a lack of options and did not like any of the opportunities available to him.

Sam also described the impact the centralization had on his family and the role that played in his bitterness. He felt he was placed in a position where he had to commute between his home and Harris City, which also stretched his expenses because he had to maintain two separate residences:

> It took me out of the household. It took me to [Harris City]. Added a monthly rental fee on top of my salary, which by the way didn't increase. I had to drive up on the Sunday afternoon and drive back on Friday if I, I decided to come home on the weekend. So it added to how I put stress on my family, took away income from my family. That's the bitter I'm talking about.

Because Sam did not want to inconvenience his family by making them move, he decided to rent a residence in Harris City, an additional expense he couldn't afford, as he did not get a salary increase. The move also took him away from his family, and he was only able to visit them on the weekend. This entire experience left Sam feeling very bitter about the centralization.

Sam's descriptions of his feelings provided the context for why the centralization was potentially a critical event for him. In his own words, Sam explained that the centralization had a significant impact on his finances and family, but perhaps the single most compelling piece of evidence that this experience changed Sam was his attitude towards management. Even his perspective of those he once viewed as "friends" changed, and any trust Sam had for management dissipated, which he describes below:

> It changed me as an individual. It has changed my opinions of lots of people. It has changed my feelings for lots of these people. Some of these people I worked with out on the road contracting. We were coworkers. And, I just felt like that all that was just tossed aside. He's my manager now and I know you know it but, uh (laughs).

Sam's opinion about some of the people in management changed. These were people who he used to work with as a contractor prior to coming to Utico. Sam felt their previous working relationship was tossed away because of the way the centralization was handled.

Sam felt abandoned by management, even those in management who he once considered to be his friends, and he felt any attempts to work with management were futile. His feelings about management can perhaps be summarized in the following exchange, during which I asked him whether he attempted to resolve conflict within his organization. He said:

> Well, I don't feel that I had a role in resolving any conflict because I had lost all hope of even being heard by management. And I think everybody was in the same, basically the same boat. Management was a foreign land.

Sam felt disconnected from management. He could not identify with or understand them, nor could he communicate with them. He saw them as something totally different from himself.

More than any of the other research participants, Sam was most impacted by the centralization, which is perhaps why his narrative more apparently reveals a critical event. His narrative stands almost in direct contrast with Rick's narrative. Rick viewed the centralization as more of a positive event in his career, and he became more willing to take his ideas before senior management because of it. Sam, however, no longer trusted management. Even though he was a manager who supervised employees at the time of this interview, he still saw himself separate from management and seemed to identify more with the acquisition agents.

Mark, Mary, and Bob's events.

The other participant interviews were coded as other events because the information they provide reinforced, to some degree, Sam and Rick's perspectives. Table 6 summarizes the events for Mark, Mary, and Bob that were coded as other events. Mark appeared to empathize in his

interview with the acquisition agents, which is similar to the views Sam expressed. Mark discussed the lack of time the individuals were given to make a decision about accepting the move to the centralized location. He also provided his perspective on the lack of information he felt was available during the time of the centralization. Mark believed that corporate management should have left someone on-site to respond to questions given the seriousness of the decision the acquisition agents were going to have to make in such a short time span.

Table 6

Summary of Other Events for Mark, Mary, and Bob

Related to Sam	Related to Rick
• Mark discussed lack of time the individuals had to make a decision about accepting the centralization, as well as a lack of information. • Bob discussed that site management could have been better briefed on the centralization.	• Mary discussed the thoroughness of the decision to centralize and the research that occurred prior to the centralization. • Bob discussed that management thought through the details of the centralization

A portion of Mary's interview revealed that the effectiveness of a potential centralization was researched prior to the actual implementation of the centralization. As with Rick, she believed that the centralization was very well thought through. In contrast to Sam and Mark, she did not view the centralization as something that happened suddenly, but rather saw it as part of a larger strategy to support buying for the line organizations. This was possibly because Rick and Mary were more directly involved in planning and preparing for the centralization than the other research participants.

As an aside, Bob seemed to remain neutral in his interview, which led me to suspect he was engaged in smoothing behavior, one risk of critical events analysis. On one hand, he mentioned that management thought through many of the details of the centralization. On the other, he also suggested that more could have been done to brief site management of the centralization, which seems to support Sam's notion that the centralization happened much too quickly. This concludes the critical events findings. These findings helped to uncover primary issues, main characters, and conflict themes.

Primary Issues and Main Characters

Conducting the critical events analysis informed the first step of the second part of the data analysis. This involved identifying the primary issues and common conflict themes. In the next section I discuss the primary issues for each research participant, beginning with Mary. These issues provide context for the participant's perspective. Following the discussion of primary issues for each participant, I will also identify the main characters related to each issue. This discussion of the main characters is important because it helps to identify who is involved in the interaction, which helps to establish the context for the primary issues. Also, knowing who is included and excluded helps to explore power dynamics from a positioning theory perspective.

Mary's primary issues.

As previously discussed, Mary supervised the Alternative Resources Acquisitions group at the time of the centralization. Her primary issues and main characters, as summarized in Table 7, related to ensuring the successful transition to the centralized state. One of the primary issues that Mary faced related to ensuring the success of the centralization. For her, going back to a non-centralized state was not an option, which she articulated a few times during her interview.

Table 7

Summary of Mary's Primary Issues and Main Characters

Primary Issues	Main Characters
• Manager's focus is on ensuring the success of the centralization	• Vice President, Rick (manager of the centralized site), Bob (manager of Robertson during the centralization), Mark (manager of Robertson after the centralization), Ray (manager of Cherokee Bend), and Patrick (manager of Little Foot).
• Central to this success is ensuring the continuity of operations once the Acquisition Agents have been centralized	• Ruth and Ron (Mary's manager)

Mary's new vice president believed that people located on-site had a better understanding of the sites' needs and their challenges. According to Mary, the vice president questioned whether a centralized team would really have the necessary sense of urgency when responding to the sites' requests. However, rather than sending the agents back to the sites, she compromised by sending different agents back to the sites only during outages, which is when the needs of the site are typically the most demanding. They reached this compromise so that the agents would not lose their connection to the sites and so that new agents who did not have the experience of working on-site would know what it was like to work in that type of environment. She also agreed to stagger the shifts so that they would have the necessary coverage for each shift working during the outage. However, these compromises were in lieu of a decentralized model.

> Only thing they're doing right now is that making sure when we're in outage, we're sending an acquisition agent to the site, at least one or two. We're not thinking about transitioning the acquisition agents back to the site. We're, we're just doing that with different acquisition agents to go to the site, work through the outage two weeks before the outage. I think a month, at least a month before the outage and that way they, they'll be there, um, and they'll be focused just on that site. The other acquisition agents will be here in corporate doing acquisitions.

In the above quote, Mary explains the plan the organization used during outages. This plan was implemented to ensure that the sites' needs were met during such a critical time. She made it clear that this plan did not mean they intended to transition the acquisition agents to the site.

Further proof of this issue was the fact that any conflict Mary experienced during the centralization centered on those who would jeopardize the success of the centralization. This was apparent when she talked about her disagreement with Ruth when she was trying to prepare the office area for the centralized group. Ruth's responsibilities included helping the organization to coordinate moves in terms of office space and equipment. It was imperative for Mary to keep the centralization a secret until management was ready to announce it. Premature knowledge of the centralization could have resulted in some type of impediment to the process. Mary learned from her management that Ruth could not always be trusted to be discrete, and they advised Mary not to include her in the planning of the work area for the centralization:

> Uh, we tried to keep everything confidential so when we were talking about, um, moving those people here, I met with a manager in facilities that said, that I told her, I said I need fourteen cubicles. And I said, this is confidential. I don't want anybody to know about it. And so, and my manager said, you know, go meet with this manager don't meet with the

> person that is in our actual group [Ruth] that does the facilities work. And so, and this was before we even notified the people so it was about two weeks before we were getting to make the big announcement.

Again, Mary did not want news of the centralization to be leaked prematurely. After consulting with her manager, they decided not to include Ruth based on her reputation for sharing confidential information. Mary directly contacted the manager in facilities instead of working through Ruth.

This excerpt from the transcript also demonstrates a second primary issue identified for Mary: ensuring the continuity of operations once the acquisition agents had been centralized was key to securing the success of the centralization. In addition to preparing the office area for the centralized group, Mary's group had to demonstrate to the site that their level of service would not be compromised by the centralization. The centralized group had to be ready to serve the sites immediately after they relocated.

Main characters for Mary's primary issues.

Again, knowing the main characters is important in terms of understanding who is involved in an interaction, as well as establishing the context for the primary issue. Mary and the vice president were the main characters in the primary issue that related to ensuring the success of the centralization; however, each of Mary's site managers were also important main characters in the success of the centralization. The site managers included Rick, manager of the centralized site; Bob, manager of Robertson during the centralization; Mark, manager of Robertson after the centralization; Ray, manager of Cherokee Bend; and Patrick, manager of Little Foot.

Ruth and Ron were the main characters for Mary's issues involving preserving the continuity of operations. Ron is actually Mary's manager. He told Mary that Ruth could not be

trusted with any secrets and asked her to work directly with facilities management to secure a work area for the centralized acquisition agents. These main characters will also be relevant when populating Mary's positioning triad.

Sam's primary issues.

I identified two primary issues for Sam as well. Table 8 lists the primary issues and related main characters. First, Sam was a former acquisition agent so he was preoccupied with the perceived unfairness of the centralization. This is noted earlier when he talked about the fact that he was only given two days for the house-hunting trip. He also incurred additional living expenses as a result of trying to maintain two residences, one in Harris City and the other in the city where he worked prior to the centralization.

Table 8

Summary of Sam's Primary Issues and Main Characters

Primary Issues	Main Characters
• Preoccupied with the perceived unfairness of the centralization	• Bob (manager of Robertson during the centralization), Jason (manager of the acquisition agents at Robertson prior to the centralization), Mary (manager of the Alternative Resources Acquisitions group), and Ron (Mary's manager)
• Lost confidence in management and became bitter about the centralization	• Stan (the manager of Robertson in 2006), Bob, Jason, Mary, and Ron • Jim, an acquisition agent who challenged management

Sam's second issue related to the idea that he had lost all confidence in management and had become bitter about the centralization. His entire interview was permeated with bitterness, which he explicitly articulated. As mentioned previously, he felt he was forced to move. He also revealed he believed the centralization was done in retaliation for a grievance that he had filed two years earlier:

> I tell you my theory, and that's all it is, is a theory, of a grieve, of a grievance I filed. That was on 11/21/06. And that was, um, we were having to go attend meetings with senior management…And plant managers, section managers were asking us to make commitments, which we were not entitled to do. Coordinators and [Acquisition Agents], we couldn't commit people and resources because we had no authority.

To which I responded as the interviewer, "And this was in November of 06?" Sam went on to confirm, "This was in November. This was leading up to July the 7th of 08."

Sam explained that he filed a grievance in November 2006 because he felt the acquisition agents were asked to do work they should not be doing. He felt they were being asked to make management decisions. According to him, they were attending management meetings and were asked to speak on behalf of management and the organization, which he felt was in direct violation of the contractual language regarding the responsibilities of an acquisition agent.

The resolution Sam sought in his grievance was to have the classifications of acquisition agents upgraded, which is similar to a promotion. However, when I asked him to clarify what he meant by a classification upgrade, it appeared the real resolution he was seeking was that the managers would step up to their own responsibilities and the agents would no longer have to attend the meetings and represent management, which he expressed in the following quote:

> And we didn't feel like [acquisition agents] were, should be having commitments…We felt like that should be, our Acquisitions' manager should be making that, should be attending those meetings and making those calls. And I, and I asked for our classification review because our classification didn't say nothing about us meeting a senior plant manager.

Sam explained that the previous manager, Stan, denied the classification upgrade and the acquisition agents still had to attend the management meetings. In his response, Stan explained that the acquisition agent's role was to serve as the technical lead and to provide guidance on technical issues to assigned personnel. While Sam agreed with the sentiment of that statement, he disagreed with the meaning of "assigned personnel" in the manager's explanation. Sam believed that assigned personnel referred to Acquisitions management and not plant management. This incident appeared to begin Sam's disillusionment with management, and Sam believed this incident ultimately led to the centralization.

Sam also rationalized that the centralization was a way for management to rid themselves of a problem employee, Jim. He explained that Jim was often outspoken on behalf of the acquisition agents, which was an annoyance to management. Sam believed management was willing to do anything to get rid of Jim, disregarding anyone who might have been negatively affected in the process, which led to Sam's bitter feelings about management and the centralization:

> [Jim] had always been a thorn in management's side because he tried to make them apply, abide by the rules and regulations and principles and policies, and they had been. This is my opinion again, strictly my opinion. They had been after him trying to get rid of him for years. You'll notice, and I'm showing you the grievance right here, you'll notice

> he didn't even sign this grievance, but I feel like this was their, management's plan to be able to get rid of Jim…Feel like that was the whole…it was a who thing and they didn't care who they hurt in the meantime. That's bitter.

Sam felt management's decision to centralize the buying function represented a kind of vendetta management held against Jim for a grievance that was filed in 2006. His perspective was that management would do anything to get rid of Jim.

Sam no longer trusted management. Even though he was a manager at the time of the interview, management, from his perspective, refers to those who were not represented employees. Even people he once considered friends but who were managers at the time of the centralization became suspect. Additionally, Sam felt he and his fellow co-workers were mistreated by acquisition management, as noted in the following excerpt:

> The entire [acquisition agent] population felt like that we had been mistreated from day one by this management. [Stan] was no longer in the picture. He was gone. [Bob] was Site Acquisition Manager. [Jason] was the [Acquisition Agent] Manager. [Mary] was our corporate boss from [Harris City]. He was replacing [Ron] who was on the management team. And we felt like that there were, all the time we were under this regime that we were mistreated. In fact there were several grievances filed on harassment. Micromanaged to no end.

Sam included all members of his management chain in his depiction of how he and the other agents were treated, even those who no longer worked for Utico. He felt he and his team were harassed and micromanaged. For him, the centralization was merely part of a long history of mistreatment that he endured during his time with the company.

Main characters for Sam's primary issues.

The main characters relating to Sam's primary issue regarding his perspective about the unfairness of the centralization included virtually all members of management, with no distinction between corporate and site management. Sam blamed all members of his management chain, which included Bob, manager of Robertson during the centralization; Jason, manager of the acquisition agents at Robertson prior to the centralization; Mary, manager of the Alternative Resources Acquisitions group; and Ron, who was over Mary.

As noted, Sam's second issue was that he had lost all confidence in management. He felt there were several members of management to blame for this, which went back even further than the centralization. The main characters for this issue were Stan (the manager of Robertson in 2006), Bob, Jason, Mary, and Ron. Sam also mentioned Jim, who was a fellow acquisition agent at Robertson. Jim is also a central character because Sam believed that the centralization was in retaliation of Jim's aggressiveness toward management. As noted when discussing Mary's main characters, knowing the main characters for Sam helped to establish the findings for his positioning triads.

Rick's primary issues.

Rick had several primary issues (see Table 9). First, he was the manager of the centralized group. He was grappling with leading the group, which involved managing people who were older than he was and who questioned his experience. During his time as manager for the group, he looked for ways to earn their trust and gain their respect. He recalled that at least one acquisition agent who would be working on his new centralized team expressed that he was not interested in working for him. Rick was disappointed by this because he was looking forward

to having someone with this agent's experience working on his team. Rick had to figure out a way to gain the employees' trust, which he explained in the following excerpt:

> **Cynthia:** You mentioned, um conflict when the centralization was announced, conflict around people located in various areas, um who didn't want to relocate? Was there a specific conflict that stands out to you?
>
> **Rick:** But I kind of heard through the grapevine, if you will, he was not interested in working for me specifically because I hadn't been at [Utico] but a few months, and I didn't know what I was doing, and he just didn't want to move, so I asked for an opportunity to speak with him and kind of hash that out. But that's one that stood out in my mind only because I was very interested in someone with his experience and level of expertise specific to [Alternative Resources], and I wanted him to be on the team, but he was really adamant about not being a part of it. So, um, he and I talked, good conversation, and uh, he's not here. He didn't come down here. Uh, it was really one that really stuck out.

Rick heard rumors that some of the agents did not want to work for him. These were some of the most experienced agents so it was important to Rick to win over the employees by reaching out to them and finding out what their concerns were. For Rick, this event represented one of the obstacles he had to overcome in leading the new group.

Table 9

Summary of Rick's Primary Issues and Main Characters

Primary Issues	Main Characters
• Grappled with leading the centralized group, which involved managing people who were older than him and who questioned his experience. He looked for ways to earn their trust and gain their respect.	All acquisition agents affected by the centralization, specifically Robert and Sally
• Believed he was being undermined by his peers	Ray (manager of Cherokee Bend), Patrick (manager of Little Foot), and Mark (manager of Robertson)
• Developed consistent processes and a consistent approach to the acquisition agent's work since they used different processes when they were at their different locations.	All acquisition agents and Mary (Rick's manager)
• Had to convince his wife to move.	Rick's wife

A second issue for Rick was that he believed he was being undermined by his peers. He mentioned that some of his peers were not supportive when he was conducting his initial research for the centralization. Rick explained that prior to going to speak to acquisition agents at each of the sites, he informed site management of when he would be coming and with whom he wanted to speak. However, he felt none of the acquisition agents were prepared for his visit when he showed up on-site:

> I was showing up at the sites after sending an email to the site manager. I need to come down and talk to your employees. Even when I sent that email, they didn't communicate to the employees that I was coming and what it was going to be about. I showed up at the site after lunch and at that point, he would say, 'Oh, Rick is here. He wants to ask you guys some questions.'

He felt the managers were ignoring his requests. They did not notify their employees that Rick would be coming and speaking with them. As a result, the agents did not know what he wanted to talk to them about, which led to what he perceived to be unnecessary confusion.

He also talked about a situation where he felt a site manager held a former employee to a higher standard now that he was working for Rick in the centralized group. Rick said that this manager complained about an acquisition agent's behavior even though this acquisition agent once worked for the manager and exhibited the same behavior during that time. In addition to complaining, the manager directed his complaint to Mary rather than coming to Rick first. He describes this situation below:

> In addition, I won't call it nit picking, but there were issues that each site had when we were decentralized as it related to the processing of orders. Um, when we were decentralized they owned those issues as I owned those issues at my site. But once centralized, those same issues became a big deal now that [loud noise] now that I owned it.

Rick felt the other managers were making bigger issues out of the acquisition agents' behavior now that they worked for him. They expected him to hold these employees accountable for issues they ignored when the agents worked at the sites. He also felt they intentionally elevated

these issues to his management before discussing it with him and giving him a chance to respond.

Another issue identified for Rick is that as the manager of this centralized group, part of his task was to develop consistent processes and a consistent approach to the work because the acquisition agents used different processes when they were at their different locations. The agents had different ways of doing some of the work, and even the sites they still interfaced with on a regular basis had their own style. Rick had to find a way to standardize work processes. While this was a primary issue for Rick, it was actually Mary (Rick's Manager) who articulated the importance of this issue for him. She said:

> So you had to put new processes in place to, to make them consistent at all sites so that manager actually when, when we had meetings with the centralized acquisition agents, they brought up some of these concerns. So, he [Rick] sent out some, uh, detailed directions to the [Acquisition] Engineering, Engineering, he just went out and solved the process and said, "This is the way it's going to be. Are you all okay with that? Here's a proposed process." And he was with that hand-off group and came up with a solution and, um, then, then communicated to everybody that was involved. So he did that two or three times in some of our processes.

Again, this reinforces the issue that a different process needed to be developed because the employees were concerned that they were all approaching the work differently. As supervisor of the group, it was Rick's responsibility to provide these consistent processes. Rick had to coordinate with different groups and then communicate the new processes and expectations.

A final issue is more personal to Rick. While the centralization represented an opportunity to advance his career, he had to convince his wife that this would be a positive move

for their family. This was their second move as a result of a job opportunity, so she was not excited about having to move again. She also grew to like the city where they used to live. Rick talked about needing to put on his "salesman's hat" to convince his wife of the move:

> Just in the centralization, um, I'm a married man and a father. Um, I've been, and it wasn't related to the centralization, but um, I lived in another city and due to the promotion, I had to relocate once and this was going to be another relocation and um, the conflict was a result of my spouse not being really being very happy.

So while he viewed the opportunity to supervise the centralized function as a positive indication that his career was headed in the right direction, he still experienced conflict in his personal life. He had to convince his wife that the centralization would be a good move for the family, as well as for him personally.

Main characters for Rick's primary issues.

As previously discussed, Rick had several issues. The first identified was leading the centralized group. The main characters for this issue were all the acquisition agents; however, he spoke of two agents specifically. One was Robert, the acquisition agent at Robertson who was vocal about not wanting to work with Rick. Rick also talked about Sally, the acquisition agent who felt she had long been overlooked.

The second issue identified for Rick was that he felt undermined by his peers. The main characters for this issue were the managers at the sites after the centralization. They included Ray, manager of Cherokee Bend; Patrick, manager of Little Foot; and Mark, manager of Robertson. He specifically spoke of an exchange with Ray, who he felt held an employee to a higher standard once the employee started working for Rick.

The third issue for Rick was developing consistent processes and work approaches. This was important because the agents were coming from different sites with different processes and work approaches. While the agents were important characters in this issue, Mary was really the key character because Rick reported to Mary.

The final issue discussed for Rick was convincing his wife to relocate. Since they had already moved from another city only two years earlier, he knew she did not want to move again. However, Rick viewed this as an opportunity and so was compelled to convince his wife of the positive benefits of the move. The main characters in this issue were Rick and his wife.

Bob's primary issues.

Bob's issues stemmed from a unique perspective because he was once a contractor, which meant he had to earn his employment. If for some reason the company was not pleased with his performance, he could have been released at any time. His competence as an employee was demonstrated by the fact that he not only served as a contractor, but was eventually hired as a full-time employee, and then became a member of management. In contrast to his own history, Bob felt that there was a strong sense of entitlement from those who worked at the site but who did not have a background in contract work.

> Um, I, I think a lot of times that the union fosters that mentality with the people. And it doesn't take much to do it with them because they're already, um, have a sense of entitlement in their jobs. And um, people that come in from the outside don't typically have that. It's people that grew up in the system, I think that, that seem to have that. I may be a little too biased there but, uh, that's what I observed you know, and this is a perspective thing. That's what I observed from my perspective, that, um, they felt that

these jobs were owed to them and changing it was just a total, um, total slap in the face to them.

Bob explained the reason why the acquisition agents took the news of the centralization so hard. He felt that the union created an environment where the represented employees felt entitled to their jobs. He was used to working as a contractor, where he could have been released more easily. The agents, on the other hand, were used to a more stable environment (in terms of changes in employment), so they were completely caught off guard when the centralization was announced. Table 10 summarizes Bob's primary issues and main characters.

Table 10

Summary of Bob's Primary Issues and Main Characters

Primary Issues	Main Characters
• Believed employees felt entitled to their jobs	• All acquisition agents
• Believed previous management did not hold employees accountable	• Stan and previous managers
• During the time of the centralization, his employees were most affected	• All of the acquisition agents at Robertson, Jason (manager of the agents at Robertson), and Mary

Another issue was that Bob believed employees were not held accountable for poor performance prior to his time as the manager at his site, so it was difficult for him and others to discipline employees. He felt employees resisted any attempt to hold them accountable, which made for a very contentious relationship between represented employees and management. There

had been a number of grievances filed against management, and from his perspective, many of these grievances were without merit:

> Uh, there would be uh, on the other hand there would be some people in the system that had been there long enough, knew how to manipulate the system and would do everything they could to, um, not do their job but at the same time tie up management's time trying to help them get on track but they knew the system so well, they knew it could tie you up for hours or days or weeks or months, um, going through the paperwork. And it didn't cost them anything because they could do anything they wanted on company time. So um, there was a huge, huge rift between management and labor at [Robertson]…

Bob felt there were those who manipulated the system to avoid doing the work. They filed grievances and used other complaint processes, which took a lot time for management to investigate. From Bob's perspective, this caused a greater disconnect between management and represented employees.

The last and possibly most important issue that Bob was dealing with was the fact that the acquisition agents at his site were most affected by the centralization. His site was farther away from the centralized site than any other site. His acquisition agents actually had to move their personal residences in order to comply with the centralization, whereas acquisition agents at the other sites could commute. Acquisition agents had to find new jobs, retire, or accept the transfer to the centralization. Many were not pleased with their options and Bob had to deal with employee complaints after the centralization was announced.

Main characters for Bob's primary issues.

The first issue discussed for Bob was that he felt the employees at his site felt entitled to employment, which contradicted his own experiences as a contractor. As a contractor he understood that his employment could be terminated at will, so he felt he had to earn his position with the company. The main characters in this issue were Rick and the agents who worked for him. He did not name these agents specifically so acquisition agents, though nondescript, are a character in their own right.

Another issue for Bob was that he believed previous management did not hold employees accountable for poor performance, which meant he had to deal with employees who were not used to this expectation from their management. Stan is a main character in this issue because he was the manager at Robertson prior to Bob.

The last issue identified for Bob was that he was the manager of the site where the employees were most impacted by the centralization because it was farther away than any other site. The main characters in this issue were the acquisition agents at the site, Jason, who was the manager of the Acquisition Agents at Robertson, and Mary, who was Bob's boss.

Mark's primary issues.

Mark became the manager at Robertson after Bob accepted another position; however, Mark was the manager of the RCCs at the time of the centralization. His primary issues and relating characters are summarized in Table 11. Mark managed a new group that was created as a result of the centralization. Many of the employees who became RCCs were once represented employees who were selected into non-represented positions. Many of them felt this was unjustly done, and some believed the most qualified people were overlooked in a few cases.

Table 11

Summary of Mark's Primary Issues and Main Characters

Primary Issues	Main Characters
• Had to help the new Resource Control Coordinators adjust to their new role as employees on the management scale	• The RCCs reporting to him: Robert, Lewis, and John.
• Concerned that corporate management did not think some things through, like ensuring buy-in from the site, the impact to other groups and organizations, and considering the differing time zones	• Corporate management and plant management

Mark had to help these new RCCs learn their new role. When they were represented employees, they had no decisional authority; their responsibilities were more administrative. They attended meetings but only passed on requests from the plant to members of management. The nature of these employees' work changed because they were considered members of management in the sense that they had the authority to make decisions within plant meetings. As members of management, they were expected to respond to management and could commit to the availability of resources. They also had the authority to make decisions on behalf of management. Mark expressed this in the following quote:

> They need to be able to commit funds. They need to be able to commit people. They need to be able to commit whatever it took to meet that job. And so they reclassification and they were reclassified as managers.

Mark needed them to begin operating in their new role as management specialists. Many of the RCCs had been represented employees for so long and were so used to management making the decisions that they found it difficult to make the switch from an administrative role to one where they had more decisional authority. Mark needed them to understand that they had the right to speak on behalf of the organization about the availability of resources, which included money and people. Getting the RCCs to make this switch was at times a source of conflict for Mark.

Another issue for Mark is that he thought corporate management did not think through all the details of the centralization. Plant management, who Mark dealt with often, did not appear to be completely onboard with the decision to centralize. Corporate management did not appear to think through the impact to other groups and organization, nor did they appear to consider simple things like the impact of having a centralized group in a different time zone:

> 7 to 3:30 in [Harris City] is not 7 to 3:30 in [Robertson]… the acquisition agents have already left. They're going home. Usually the hot items of the day doesn't get realized until 3 o'clock so now we're back to calling people out. So the time we get a hold of somebody, it's two hours later, well guess what? That's two hours into an emergency. So, uh, they're still there.

Harris City was one hour behind Robertson; however, the agents were still working the same shift they worked at the sites despite the difference in the time zones. This meant there were times when Mark or others at his site could not readily access the agents because they had already left for the day. This interfered with Mark's ability to deal with emergencies in a timely manner because he would have to track down an agent and call for that agent to come back in to work. This was an issue for Mark because he had to answer to plant management about the delays.

Complicating this lack of attention to detail was the fact that the site experienced a critical emergency after the acquisition agents were relocated. A bushing transformer had a blowout, which caused the site to lose power. The emergency required immediate resources; however, no one was on-site to assist with the purchase of the new transformer. Since the power was gone, they could not communicate via their office phones or email. The only means of communication they had were their cell phones.

Main characters for Mark's primary issues.

Again, Mark became the manager after Bob. Mark noted definite gaps in communications between site and corporate management. He led a team who was still very much wounded by the centralization and appeared to empathize with the employees more than can be seen in Bob's interview.

There were two issues identified for Mark. The first was that he managed the RCCs immediately after the centralization. The RCCs were non-represented positions, but the people who were selected into these positions were used to working as represented employees, meaning they were used to being represented by unions. The change from represented to non-represented employees was a significant change for them. The main characters were those who were the RCCs reporting to him. They were Robert, Lewis, and John.

The second issue was that Mark had to deal with plant management once he became the manager of Robertson. In his interactions with plant management, he did not really think that corporate management did enough to prepare plant management for the centralization. He also felt that corporate management did not think through all the details. Mark did not mention anyone specifically by name so the main characters are generic to corporate management and plant management.

This concludes the findings relating to primary issues and main characters for each research participant. Each participant seemed to be dealing with issues that were specific to them. Understanding primary issues for each participant will inform the interpretation of their positioning triads in chapter five. Identifying these issues also help to make the conflicts more noticeable and helps to explain the participant's perspectives of the conflict, which fell into two common themes. These common conflict themes will be discussed in the next section.

Common Conflict Themes

Also related to the first step of the second part of the data analysis is identifying common conflict themes. Two common conflict themes emerged across all participants. First, there was the conflict relating to the centralization because some people supported the idea and others were against it. Second, there was the conflict between management and employees who did not want to operate in the new roles. These roles were the result of new positions being created, as well as the result of operating as a centralized group.

Theme 1: Support for or against the centralization.

The centralization caused conflict in general. There were those who supported the centralization and those who were clearly against it, and as a result management ended up at odds with employees over the decision to centralize. Some employees, particularly at Robertson, questioned whether management had the right to relocate the buying function. Employees from Robertson had to move to support the centralization if they could not find another job or if they were not ready to retire. They felt as if they had no other alternative, and as a result they filed a grievance against the decision to centralize.

Mary was one of the strongest supporters of the centralization among the research participants I interviewed. She believed in the centralization and was prepared to defend her

organization's decision to centralize the acquisition agents. She felt the centralization was a good move for the organization. From her perspective, Acquisitions became more efficient and the employees were able to learn from one another. These were seen as positive changes, so her opinion about the centralization did not waiver, as can be seen from the following exchange:

> It was a good, I, I, to, to this day I think it was the right thing to do. Because it helped us, um, make some changes in that group specifically. Um, and so a lot of times when people say, "Oh well, I like for them to be at the site," but I know what we were going through during that time, and I know the, the benefits and efficiencies that we got out of it like, um, consistencies across the board in the processes. Uh, I think we got some productivity rates up. Uh, at the time, though, we changed to another system so some of the productivity rates changed because we had to get, uh, used to a new system. But by being out here together, instead of being out in the field, they were able to learn from each other.

Mary was in favor of the centralization, and as manager of the division, she often had to defend the appropriateness of the centralization. She was one of the representatives of management when the grievance was filed against the reclassification of represented work to management work. She also had to justify the centralized model to a new vice president that favored a decentralized model. She saw the benefits of the centralization when compared to the performance of the agents prior to the centralization, which for her validated the decision to centralize.

The acquisition agents, especially those who had to physically move to support the centralization, offer a stark contrast to Mary's perspective. These agents were separated from their community, family, and friends, causing them to be squarely against the centralization. This

can be seen in Sam's transcript. Sam was one of the acquisition agents at Robertson at the time of the centralization, and he described himself as being very bitter about the entire process:

> It took me out of the household. It took me to [Harris City]. Added a monthly rental fee on top of my salary, which by the way didn't increase. I had to drive up on the Sunday afternoon and drive back on Friday if I, I decided to come home on the weekend. So it added to how I put stress on my family, took away income from my family. That's the bitter I'm talking about.

Sam was personally inconvenienced by the centralization, so his perspective differed completely from Mary's. He had extra expenses because he was renting an apartment in Harris City, he was away from his family during the week, and he had to travel on the weekends if he wanted to see his family. This was a stressful experience for him and his family, and this caused him to be bitter about the entire process.

Working against such strong opposing viewpoints, members of management like Mary experienced conflict with acquisition agents who questioned whether management had the right to centralize. Mary remembered one employee in particular, Jim, who asked a lot of questions. She mentioned that this employee had a history of filing a lot of grievances, so she and management were very cautious when responding to his questions:

> We had a previously an employee that was at times a problem because he had filed a lot of grievances, uh, with the union. And we, we, [Utico], we the company felt like they were not legitimate grievances, um grievances related to he had, he had too much work, which you know that's, yeah, you can grieve on it, but it doesn't make sense so you throw it out. So, so we felt like he was, he was one of these employees that complained about a lot of things instead of going on and getting the job done. Um, and so, he asked a,

> a number of questions which we, it took time to respond but we wanted to make sure that we responded correctly to everybody.

Management identified Jim as a problem employee. Because he had previously filed a number of grievances against management, Mary anticipated that he would likely file a grievance over the centralization. Because of this, Mary had the legal department and human resources check her responses before she answered Jim.

Rick also supported the decision to centralize. He may well have been the architect for the centralization strategy, and he shared that he was very much involved in identifying how a centralized acquisition function would work. He seemed to suggest that he was rewarded for his research by being made manager over the centralized group; however, he experienced resistance when assuming his new management position over the group. There were employees who did not want to be there and who did not want to work for him, but he was determined to make the centralization a success because he supported the business decisions behind the centralization.

As previously discussed in the Primary Issues section, Rick referred to an encounter with an employee who had to centralize if he could not find another position. Rick said that this employee made it clear he did not want to work for Rick because the employee questioned whether Rick had the experience to lead the group. The employee also did not want to move. Rick contacted this employee in an effort to gain his support because he wanted a good working relationship with all those who would be reporting to him.

It also appeared that plant management was not fully in favor of the centralization because they were concerned about the quality of service they would receive when the buying function was located offsite. Plant management was the primary customer for the buying

function and the reason the organization even existed. Their sole purpose was to assist the plant with acquiring material, goods, and services.

Both Bob and Mark spoke about the concerns that plant management raised when they learned that the acquisition agents would no longer be located on-site. Since Bob and Mark worked on-site, the plant managers more readily verbalized their concerns to them. Mark said:

> Um, the biggest point was the plant didn't understand why we had to take an item and send it to [acquisitions], when [acquisitions] has been here for so long and they could pick up the phone and talk to the acquisition agent. Whereas, like I said, now, it was harder for them to talk to an acquisition agent in [Harris City] who they didn't even know because going back to, they may be talking to an acquisition agent that was from [Cherokee Bend] or [Little Foot] originally and they never dealt with that person before. So, they were used to dealing with certain people here at [Robertson] and those people were no longer here.

The excerpt above describes the difficulty plant management had in adjusting to the centralization. The plant management could no longer speak with agents with whom they were familiar, and Mark had to deal with disgruntled plant management who disagreed with the centralization.

Just as there was conflict resulting from those that were for or against the centralization, there was also conflict resulting from individuals operating in new roles. This can be seen in Rick's situation in trying to assume a new management role over the centralized group. It is also evident in Mark's efforts to orient the RCCs to their new role. These conflicts will be discussed next.

Theme 2: Operating in new roles.

The second theme was the conflict surrounding the new positions and new work processes that were created as a result of the centralization. This meant that individuals had to get used to operating within a new role. The acquisition agents were no longer on site, which caused conflict over how the centralized group would work with the sites. Those who were assuming new positions had to learn the responsibilities of these new positions and clashed with management over performing these responsibilities. There was even conflict relating to how the centralized acquisition agents would work together as one group. Because the acquisition agents were no longer onsite and were merged with acquisition agents from other sites, they had to learn to work with various groups at the sites to fully support them. Sometimes they had to work with people they did not know well, which resulted in conflict because each site had different working styles and expectations.

Mary talked about the challenges of bringing a new group together. As previously stated, she talked about the need to develop consistencies in handoff tasks once the agents had been centralized. She also talked about how minor differences in how agents interfaced with other departments when they were decentralized created issues once they were centralized. These differences, although minor, had to be addressed by the manager so that the agents could operate as one cohesive team. As a result, Rick developed a consistent set of processes for the team when operating with other departments within the Acquisitions organization.

Rick talked about the conflict he experienced as a result of taking on the new role as the manager of the centralized group. As discussed previously, he believed the other managers resented him because he was selected as the manager. He believed the managers resented him because they were older and had more years of experience with the company:

> At the other sites…These gentlemen were, uh, for lack of a better word, older, that worked at [Utico], specifically in [Alternative Resources] for more years than I had. Um, and in the centralization, which I figured that I would, in the, in the scheme of things, be one of their employees, because they had been there longer. And I was Ok with that, and I had accepted that. Uh, but it didn't turn out that way. I was given the, uh, the role of being manager of the group, and they were given other roles, uh, which they weren't included in the centralization. With that being the case, uh, they were not very happy with me. And as such, in the initial stages of the, um, centralization, I'd say sort of gave me a hard time.

Rick said the other managers were not as involved in planning the centralization as he was, so his peers resented his role in helping to plan the centralization. Specifically, he spoke of the incident where the manager sent emails to Mary indicating that Rick was not responsive and was slow in responding to issues. He said that his management recognized that the other managers were exaggerating issues and they had to speak to the managers about working with him so that the centralization would be successful.

Rick also felt there was conflict between him and his employees when they learned he would be manager of the centralized group. He believed the employees resented that he was selected as manager because they were unaware of his experience and credentials, which qualified him to lead the centralized group. Another reason he believed they resented his selection as manager of the group was because of his age. Rick summarized these ideas about how his employees responded to the announcement of his position as manager of the centralized group in the following excerpt:

> In addition, once the change was announced, it was also announced that I would be, um, taking the lead on managing the group and managing the process, so there was conflict in that…They weren't aware of my work history or education or anything. They thought I had been at [Utico] for five months, so there was conflict in, um, that piece of it. I guess I'll throw in there my age. When initially centralized, I think I was, other than one person, everyone in my group was older and more seasoned than myself.

He went on to explain the incident noted previously between him and one of his employees who did not want to work with him. Rick talked to the employee about the centralization and told him about his education and experience, which the employee was surprised to learn.

Rick also talked about another employee, one of his most experienced acquisition agents, who was disappointed because she was not given a higher-level position when the centralization was announced and Rick was appointed leader of the group. The employee felt she had long been overlooked, and as a result she was apprehensive about working with Rick. Rick felt he needed her support and met with her to explore her issues. When he learned that she felt she was being overlooked, he explained that he could not correct the issues in the past but would give her more opportunities while she was reporting to him

Sam also briefly mentioned conflict about the new positions that were created once the group was centralized. He talked about how prior to the centralization he and a few of his colleagues operated in dual positions. They were expected to do both acquisition agent work and what he called "resource analyst" work, which involved attending site meetings with plant managers. As noted previously, attending those meetings with the plant managers led Sam to file a grievance against Stan challenging whether it was appropriate for him to attend those meetings.

It should also be noted that resource analysts were classified as acquisition agents. Resource analyst was an unofficial title used by the agents at Robertson.

After the centralization, the organization turned the resource analyst positions, which were represented positions, into management specialist positions, which were non-represented, because they wanted the analysts to have higher-level responsibilities. These new positions became RCCs. The positions were posted as vacancies on the inner office bulletin board, and employees had to apply and compete for the positions. Those who were selected would not have to centralize or relocate. Sam felt that some of the individuals who were selected were not qualified for the positions. While he understood that some of his co-workers applied to keep from relocating, he felt that those who were doing the resource analyst work previously should be considered above the others.

Bob and Mark explained that there was a grievance filed over the new RCC positions. The grievance related to whether management had the right to take away the resource analyst work from the union and then turn it into management specialist work. Again, management specialist work was non-represented, meaning those employees were not represented by a union. Bob mentioned an encounter he observed between Jim, one of the acquisition agents, and his supervisor, Jason. Bob said that Jim was one of the more vocal acquisition agents and he had been a problem for management in the past. Jim was upset about the centralization and confronted Jason. Bob chose not to intervene and the confrontation soon ended. However, Mark struggled more intensely with those who were selected into the RCC positions. These were individuals who were not used to acting on a management scale. Previously, their responsibilities had only been administrative; they attended meetings, noted any requests from plant management, and reported those requests back to management so that they could decide whether

the organization could meet that request. The key difference between their old responsibilities and their new responsibilities was that they now had the authority to commit to the availability of resources. In other words, they had the authority to speak on behalf of management. A represented employee has no such authority.

Mark talked about the challenge of helping the new RCCs act within their new role. He needed them to represent the organization in the plant meetings and to push back on plant management if their requests were unreasonable. Plant meetings can be intimidating, and Mark noted that plant management could be very demanding, so some of the RCCs were reluctant to push back:

> It was, you're, you're, you're managing the group that used to just scrub a package... It went from just statusing to actually going as a representative for your group and representing you in a meeting…And then they had not only just representing, taking ownership of that meeting and getting them to that level of ownership. Uh, and when I say level of ownership, getting to the point to where you can go into the meeting and say 'and that material will not be here, remove that from the schedule.'

Mark needed the RCCs to understand the organization's processes, as well as the plant's processes, so that they could confidently and competently represent management in the meetings. He needed them to understand how their new role would differ from their old role. Mark specifically spoke of one RCC who was so hesitant to speak out in the meetings that he had the RCC shadow him during one of the meetings to see how he handled turning down the plant's request, as described below:

> I said, "I understand your standpoint. I understand you want, we have to make a decision the material is going to be here. The material right now has got a 26-week lead time.

> We're a T-8, which is 8 weeks out before you work this guy and I want it removed from the schedule." Well then he came back and he said, "Well who do you think you are, the Site VP?" And I said "No, I am the [Site Acquisition Manager] and I want it removed from the schedule because the material won't be here. In accordance with the [policy], which says that if this material is not there at T point or T-5, then it gets removed from the schedule or it's either left on the schedule at risk.

It was this experience that gave the employee a firsthand look at how forceful he needed to be when representing the organization and the importance of having a firm understanding of the plant's procedures. After that meeting, Mark told the employee that was the way he needed the RCCs to represent management during the plant meetings.

In the experience referenced above, Mark is also in conflict with one of the plant managers over materials in the schedule. He wanted a certain piece of material removed from the schedule since it would not be delivered in time. The manager felt the material needed to be included in the schedule and insisted on keeping it in the schedule. As a result, Mark asserted his role as the representative of the Acquisitions organization and cited company procedure to have the manager remove it. This represented a conflict Mark experienced as a result of helping a new RCC operate within a new role.

Now that the common conflict themes have been identified, the second step of part 2 of the data analysis is analyzing the data according to the positioning theory framework. The next section will present the storylines, positions, and speech acts in conflict during the reorganization. The common conflict themes will serve as the lens for presenting the storylines, positions, and speech acts. In other words, the elements of the positioning triad (storylines, positions, and speech acts) will be related to the common conflict themes previously discussed.

To help establish context, a summary of all the storylines will be presented first because the storylines are broad and span across all participants. The positions and speech acts in this study, however, are specific to the individuals. For this reason, the complete positioning triads (i.e. storylines, positions related to each storyline, and speech acts) for each participant will be presented next.

Summary of Storylines

Storylines are patterns of behavior and interactions that influence future interactions. They are how the past and present shape the future. They provide the context for how people relate to one another. For instance, how an employee relates to his or her supervisor may be shaped by previous experiences dealing with supervision. Table 12 summarizes all the storylines identified for the two different conflict themes.

Table 12

Summary of Conflict Themes and Associated Storylines.

Theme 1: Support For or Against the Centralization	Theme 2: Operating in New Roles
1. Management as Conscientious Business Leaders	1. Supervisors versus Subordinates
2. Management as Thoughtless	2. Site versus Corporate
3. Employees as Troublemakers	
4. Supervisors versus Subordinates	

The first conflict theme centered around those who were either for or against the centralization. As represented in Table 2, there are four storylines for this conflict theme. They are *Management as Conscientious Business Leaders, Management as Thoughtless, Employees as Troublemakers,* and *Supervisors versus Subordinates*.

The first storyline is that of Management as Conscientious Business Leaders. This storyline relates primarily to how the managers rationalized the decision to centralize. For most of management, the decision to centralize was based on improving effectiveness within the organization. They felt there was an opportunity to boost productivity, ensure consistency, and create better processes and procedures. Centralization was in line with industry practices, as pointed out by Rick, and was also recommend, in part, by an external consulting agency.

In direct contrast to this storyline is the storyline of Management as Thoughtless. This storyline seems to suggest that management showed disregard for how the centralization would impact the acquisition agents personally in terms of their finances, family life, or career advancement. For instance, Mark believed that the centralization seemed very rushed, and that some of the details that related specifically to how the acquisition agents were handled were not fully considered. Mark felt that there should have been someone left on-site for a few days to answer questions after the centralization was announced. This storyline also suggests that management did not consider how the operations of the site would be affected. Those on-site who were part of management talked about how they were challenged by management at the plant. Mark specifically mentioned that corporate management initially did not consider differing time zones and that this resulted in confusion. While corporate management might have thought they were being considerate, some felt their actions represented a certain sense of coldness and thoughtlessness.

The third storyline is Employees as Troublemakers. This storyline suggests that management was concerned that some employees would interfere with the success of the centralization. The employees who did this seemed to have a history of causing problems for

management, and managers who followed this storyline responded to employees they viewed as troublemakers in a cautious manner, which caused conflict in some situations.

The last storyline for this particular conflict theme is that of Supervisors versus Subordinates. The research participants talked about experiences with their employees or experiences with their own management. The entire process of the centralization seemed to follow this theme in that the supervisors were telling the employees that as subordinates they had to centralize. They had to comply with the dictates of supervision.

The second conflict theme identified in this study is Operating in New Roles. This theme represents conflict participants experienced as a result of either operating within new roles or helping others operate in new roles. This theme only has two storylines, which are *Supervisor versus Subordinates* and *Site versus Corporate*.

The Supervisor versus Subordinate storyline is similar to the storyline discussed under conflict theme one; however, the related positions and speech acts that occurred seem more related to how individuals were trying to adjust to their new roles. Some of the acquisition agents applied for and were selected into new positions at the site, so they sometimes conflicted with management on their new responsibilities. This was also true for those individuals who relocated to Harris City. Even though they were still acquisition agents, they had to learn how to work and interact with one another and with the new manager of the centralized site. This theme also highlights the struggles management encountered in accomplishing work post-centralization.

The second storyline for the second conflict theme, as identified in the previous table, is Site versus Corporate. This storyline represented a kind of *us versus them* line of thinking, where individuals felt a strong sense of attachment to a particular group or location. From the site's perspective, they felt their concerns about the work or buy-in from plant management were

overlooked by corporate management. For instance, Bob seemed to question whether corporate management got full commitment from the sites before proceeding with the centralization. Mark spoke about having to work through an emergency when the power failed on-site. He suggested that the emergency was more intense because there were fewer resources on site. From the corporate perspective, Rick felt pressure from his peers on-site because from his perspective they seemed to magnify small issues.

The next section will present the positioning triads for each participant. Each triad will include the storyline, positions, and speech acts for a particular conflict episode. The triads for the first conflict theme will be presented first, followed by the second conflict theme. The reporting scheme for each conflict relating to a particular theme will begin with the participant's storyline, followed by the positions, then the speech acts. The triad that most illustrates the theme and storyline will also be represented as a figure.

Conflict Theme 1 Triads: 1. Conscientious Business Leader

Mary appeared to follow the storyline of *Management as Conscientious Business Leaders*. She specifically spoke about the business advantages of the centralization and the efficiencies gained. She also mentioned that one of their other buying functions in another operating organization, which centralized previously, served as a pilot for how the centralization might work within the Alternative Resources function. For her, the decision to centralize was a good business decision.

Mary was willing to defend the decision to centralize against those that might jeopardize its success and anyone who questioned its merit. This was why she chose not to involve Ruth in the discussion about the new work area for the centralized acquisition agents, even though Ruth was the organization's liaison for such projects. She was concerned that news about the

centralization would be leaked prior to the official announcement, so she tried to exclude Ruth from the meetings because she was told that Ruth did not keep things confidential. Ruth was upset with Mary when she discovered she had been excluded. This caused one of the major conflicts noted by Mary; however, Mary felt her actions were necessary for the success of the transition, which seemed to follow the Conscientious Business Leader storyline.

Within this one conflict, there were several acts of positioning that occurred. Positionings represent the roles, rights, and duties one assumes when interacting with another. As previously discussed, a person can assert him or herself, or another person, in a certain way during a particular interaction. This initial assertion is referred to as first-order positioning. If this positioning is challenged, it is referred to as second-order positioning. If the positioning is negotiated in a conversation other than the initial exchange, it is referred to as third-order positioning.

In the context of Mary's conflict episode, Mary's manager told her to meet directly with the facilities manager instead of Ruth to secure cubicle space for the centralized acquisition agents. The manager positioned himself as one in authority over Mary, which is first-order positioning. He asserted himself as one who had the right to tell Mary to exclude Ruth. Mary did what was requested without questioning it, which validated the positioning.

The next vertex in the positioning triad is speech acts, which are separated into illocutionary and perlocutionary forces. The illocutionary force represents the initiating utterance. Like the first move on a chess board, it is the first move in an exchange that sets all other moves into play. The perlocutionary force is the response or consequence of the utterance, whether intended or not. It is what happens as a result of the initiating utterance.

Only a few speech acts were necessary to accomplish the positioning between Mary and her manager. Mary's manager told her not to involve Ruth, which was the illocutionary force or the initiating utterance. Mary did not include Ruth as requested by her management, which is an example of perlocutionary response. Figure 3 provides a pictorial representation for how triads might appear using the exchange between Mary and her manager:

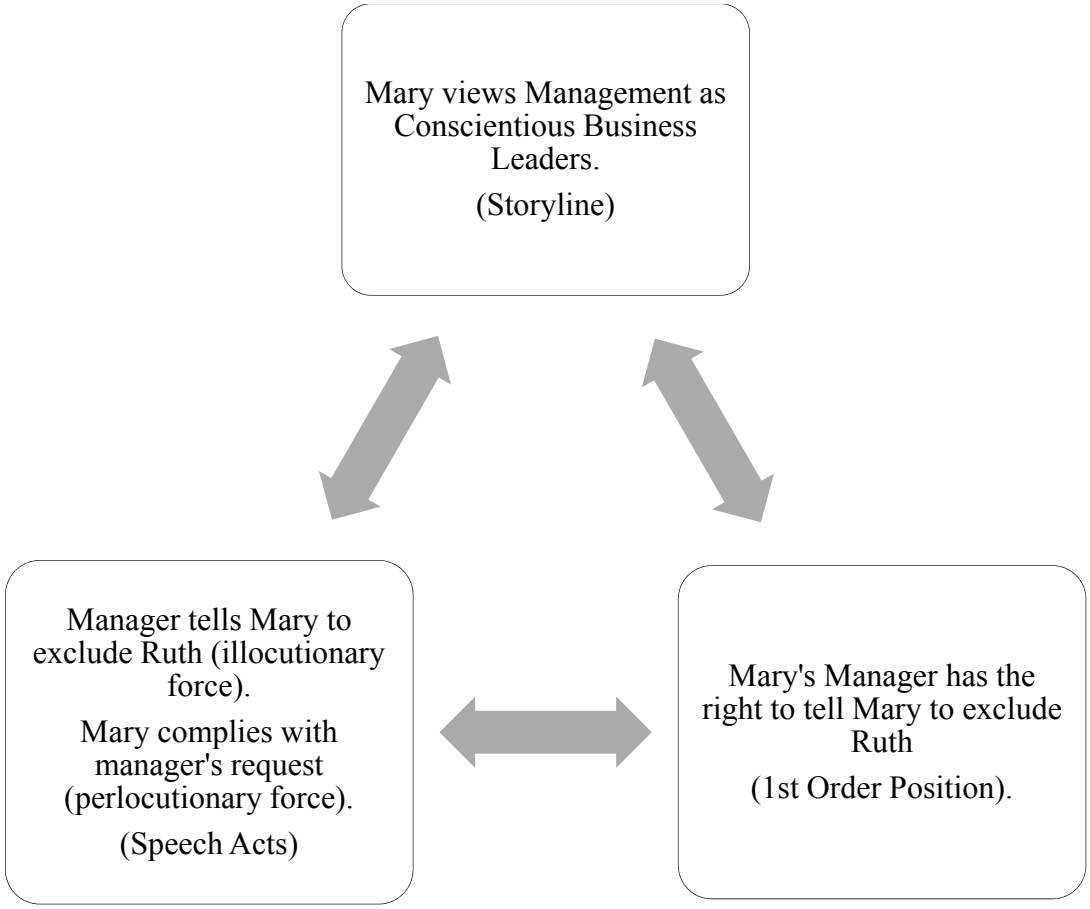

*Figure 3.*Positioning triad model depicting the interplay of the storyline, position, and speech acts for the conflict between Mary and Ruth. Adapted from " Introducing Positioning Theory" by R. Harre and L. van Langenhove in *Positioning Theory*, p. 18. Copyright 1999 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Consideration must also be given to how Ruth was affected by the decisions that led to her being excluded from the meetings to set up the work area for the centralized acquisition agents. Positioning and speech acts will now be discussed with this consideration in mind.

By excluding Ruth from the meetings, Mary and her manager positioned Ruth as someone who could not be trusted with secrets, which is first-order positioning. The facilities representative brought Ruth to the meeting, even though Mary asked her to keep the meeting confidential. This challenged management's positioning of Ruth as an untrustworthy employee, which is second-order positioning. Ruth also challenged the positioning by asserting she could keep the centralization a secret. Ruth confronted Mary and challenged her initial positioning, which is second-order positioning. However, Mary and her manager later rejected Ruth's repositioning and continued to view her as unreliable, which is third-order positioning. Mary also added that Ruth was thought of as a bit of a procrastinator, indicating that she still viewed Ruth in much the same way. This indicates that Ruth's attempt to reposition herself was unsuccessful from management's perspective.

In this incident, it was actually Mary's manager who initiated the exchange, so the illocutionary force was that he told Mary not to involve Ruth because she could not keep things confidential. Mary in turn contacted the facilities organization directly to make preparations for the acquisition agents' space (perlocutionary force). During this conversation she also asked the facilities manager to keep the meeting a secret. This utterance represented an illocutionary force for the facilities manager because it was a request. Despite her request, the facilities manager brought Ruth to the meeting, which is an example of perlocutionary force, even though it was not the response Mary anticipated. Ruth was upset because she was not initially invited to the meeting, which is another example of perlocutionary force.

When Ruth came to the meeting, she told Mary that she could have kept the centralization confidential. Mary did not discuss the specifics of how she responded to Ruth's statement in the interview. Mary did say, however, that she did not tell Ruth what management thought of her. Mary also said that Ruth stopped speaking to her. While it is hard to relate this to a specific exchange, it did appear ultimately to be a reaction (representative of a perlocutionary force) to Mary's attempt to exclude Ruth from the meetings to set up the acquisition agents' space.

As previously mentioned, Mary also had a different opinion than her vice president regarding the centralization that fits within the Managers as Conscientious Business Leader storyline. The vice president was new to the organization and felt differently about the centralization model. He felt that a centralized function might not have the same appreciation for the emergent needs of the site; however, Mary had the opportunity to witness the positive changes post-centralization. She stood behind the decision to centralize despite her vice president's concerns because she believed it was the best decision for the company.

Based on the definition of conflict in chapter one, this was a conflict because the vice president was initially not in favor of a centralized function. It was not a model with which he was familiar and he doubted its effectiveness. By questioning the centralization, he demonstrated first-order positioning and positioned himself as one who had authority to question the centralization. He directed Mary to send acquisition agents back to the site during outages.

Mary did not challenge the vice president's positioning per say. She seemed to indicate that it was his right to question this decision. However, Mary positioned herself as one who had the responsibility to defend the centralization because she knew what it was like before the vice president came. While Mary complied with the request to send the agents back to the site during

outages, she did not completely change her opinion because she was still firm in her resolve regarding the centralization. Even though her positioning seemed to be in response to her vice president, it is categorized here as first-order positioning because she did not necessarily challenge the vice president's right to question her. Instead, she asserted herself as one who knew what was in the best interest of the organization based on her long history with the group.

In this exchange, the vice president questioned Mary about the centralization (illocutionary force). She explained why the agents were centralized (perlocutionary force) and defended the appropriateness of the centralization. Mary was adamant that the agents should not be re-located back to the sites. The new vice president then requested that the agents at least be located on site during outages (illocutionary force). While informed by Mary's defense of the centralization, this is categorized as an illocutionary force because it initiated a new action. The fact that Mary complied with this request is an example of perlocutionary force because it represents a response to the illocutionary force.

Rick's perspectives also seem to fit within a storyline of Management as Conscientious Business Leaders. He spoke about how the decision to centralize was consistent with his graduate studies in business. Since the centralization was consistent with his studies, Rick felt that management was using proven strategies in business and industry. He also could match management's decision with top-quartile practices within the industry. Therefore, from Rick's perspective, the decision to centralize was a good decision for the company.

Since corporate management asked Rick to research centralization and then used his idea, he was positioned as a peer (first-order) from his perspective. Interestingly, Rick positioned management as his superiors during his interview (third-order) because he felt that they had the right to position him as either a peer or a subordinate. Still, Rick interpreted this as

management's acceptance of him as a peer because they accepted his idea and then implemented it.

The speech acts relating to Rick's perspective of being positioned as a peer began with management requesting that he research how the centralization would work, which was the illocutionary force. In response, Rick conducted the research. This was the perlocutionary force. In addition, Rick provided a recommendation to management, which essentially became an illocutionary force, and management then implemented Rick's recommendation. Again, Rick interpreted these actions as a sign that management recognized and valued his ideas.

Mary and Rick had experiences that seemed to fit within the Management as Conscientious Business Leaders storyline. Mary's conflicts related to her attempt to set up the acquisition agents' space and her interactions with Ruth, who handled space requirements for the group. She also had conflicting ideas with her new VP, who favored the decentralized model. Rick's perspective seemed to contradict with his peers, which is why it is presented in this section as a conflict. He had a hand in organizing the centralization, while his peers did not, so he felt the centralization was the right thing to do based on his studies. Positioning triads, including storylines, positions, and speech acts, were presented for these experiences to better understand Mary and Rick's perspectives of the conflict.

Conflict Theme 1 Triads: 2. Management as Thoughtless

The next storyline is *Management as Thoughtless*, which is where the perspectives of the other research participants seem to fit. For instance, Bob spoke about how corporate management could have done more to get buy-in from plant management. Even though Bob seemed to understand the decision to centralize and thought that corporate management handled the details of the centralization well, he still believed more could have been done to ensure

approval from plant management. He spoke about having to explain the move to plant management because corporate management had not adequately explained it. He did not go into specific detail but only said that plant management did not understand the move and wanted to know why the change was occurring.

When plant management questioned Bob, they positioned themselves as the customer, which meant they had the right to inquire into the organization's decision to centralize. They also positioned Bob as someone who had the responsibility of explaining the decision since he was a representative of the organization. Both of these positions are examples of first-order positioning. Bob did not suggest that he challenged plant management's positioning, but he did seem to suggest in the interview that it was actually corporate management's responsibility to provide plant management with the necessary explanations for the move, which represents a kind of third-order positioning.

When examining the positions and storyline for this particular exchange between Bob and plant management, the illocutionary force would be plant management's questioning of the centralization. Their questioning was the initiating action that called for some sort of response from Bob. As a result, the perlocutionary force was that Bob had to explain the organization's decision to centralize.

Mark offered more detail about conflicts within this storyline. He talked about his personal impression of the centralization and seemed disappointed with how corporate management handled the centralization. He seemed to suggest that management gave little consideration for how the acquisition agents would be affected by the centralization. He described management's actions as "dropping a bomb" on the acquisition agents.

As noted in previous triads, corporate management positioned themselves (first-order) as having the right to centralize the function. The acquisition agents did question and challenge this positioning because Mark indicated that they filed the grievance, which is an example of second-order positioning because it attempts to renegotiate this positioning. Mark also demonstrates a kind of third-order positioning in the interview because he positioned corporate management as having the responsibility to give more consideration to how they implemented the centralization.

When Mark spoke of his impression of the centralization, he indicated that management acted a bit hastily and thoughtlessly. Mark said that corporate management came down and gave a formal presentation to the sites, which was the illocutionary force. Mark said he thought it was "unpersonal" and "unnamed." He also said that he thought the change was made too quickly because the agents were only given four weeks to respond. Since his feelings were in response to corporate management's announcement, they serve as evidence of perlocutionary force.

Mark also said that the managers in other organizations did not like that they were not able to have face-to-face contact with the acquisition agents, which is another example of perlocutionary force resulting from the announcement. The employees at the Acquisition organization that was still located on the site had to change the way they worked together. Mark said that some employees did not understand the reorganization. Some people expressed concern because they thought they were qualified for the newly created positions but did not get the jobs. Mark said management had to constantly explain the centralization. He also said employees had to learn new roles, change their mindset, and decide whether they would move or stay.

Mark also talked about plant management's concerns over no longer having the acquisition agents on-site. He spoke about having to speak to plant management about why they could no longer speak to a particular acquisition agent or purchase things on-site. He mentioned

plant management being upset because they could not directly buy flat screen televisions for an information room they were constructing.

In this exchange, those in plant management positioned themselves as those who had the right to question why certain materials could not be purchased on-site, even though these guidelines were set by the Acquisitions organization. There is an implicit first-order positioning on the Acquisitions organization's part that suggested they had the right to set the guidelines for how acquisitions would be done. Plant management's questioning of this right is a kind of challenge, which is second-order positioning. Mark did not indicate that he challenged plant management's positioning; however, he did position himself as having the responsibility (or duty) to educate plant management on the new guidelines.

The illocutionary force in this particular exchange is when plant management asked Mark why they could not go to the local Best Buy to purchase the flat screen televisions. Mark did not respond by going to Best Buy to buy the televisions. Instead, he reminded the plant management team that these items were to be purchased by the acquisition agents who were in Harris City. This explanation, even though it was not the response the plant management desired, represented the perlocutionary force.

Rick also had a conflict that seemed to fit within the Management as Thoughtless storyline. The conflict occurred in his personal life. His wife did not want to relocate to another city because they had relocated only a few years earlier. Rick spoke of having to convince her on the benefits of the move. For her, the move was an inconvenience for the family.

In the exchange, Rick had to sell his wife on the idea of the move, which meant he was positioned as the salesman and his wife was positioned as the skeptical customer. Both of these are first-order positionings. As the customer, she had the right to question whether the

centralization was a good move for her family and he had the responsibility of satisfying her concerns so that she could make her decision.

The illocutionary force was that Rick informed his wife of his promotion and the move to Harris City. The perlocutionary force was that his wife was upset because the company had already moved them once. Rick then initiated a new illocutionary force by stating the positive benefits of the move and promising that the family would not move again. The resulting perlocutionary force was that his wife agreed to the move.

Sam operated most from the storyline of Management as Thoughtless. He made no distinction between corporate management and the Acquisitions managers located on-site. For him, management had been very thoughtless. As evidence of this, he mentioned that it was the company policy to cover only 75% of expenses for the first and last day of the house-hunting trip. Because the company only approved a two-day house-hunting trip for the acquisition agents who were moving to Harris City, only 75% of his expenses were covered each day. In addition, he felt that management did not consider that they were moving the acquisition agents away from their communities, their friends, and their families. From his perspective, he was given a very limited time to make these decisions, which is another indication of his perspective of management as thoughtlessness.

Because management announced the centralization and Sam complied, this can be viewed as first-order positioning. Management positioned themselves as having the authority to transfer the buying function to a centralized buying location. In the interview, Sam did question how management approached the centralization, but he did not really mention that he questioned whether they had the right to do this. In other words, his question pertained to whether management *should* have centralized the acquisition agents and not whether they *had the*

authority to relocate the agents to Harris City. Sam also demonstrates third-order positioning because during the interview he positioned management as overbearing. At the same time, he positioned himself and the other agents at his site as helpless and victimized employees.

The illocutionary force began when management announced the centralization. The perlocutionary force was that Sam, as well as the other acquisition agents, felt forced to move. Another perlocutionary force was that Sam felt very bitter about the whole experience. He changed his opinions about some members of management and no longer regarded them as friends. He also incurred additional expenses by trying to maintain two residences because he did not want to relocate his family. On the positive side, he did mention that he made lifelong friends with some of the agents he met once he was centralized. Again, all of these consequences can be considered perlocutionary forces because they are in response to management's announcement to centralize. Sam's triad is represented in Figure 4.

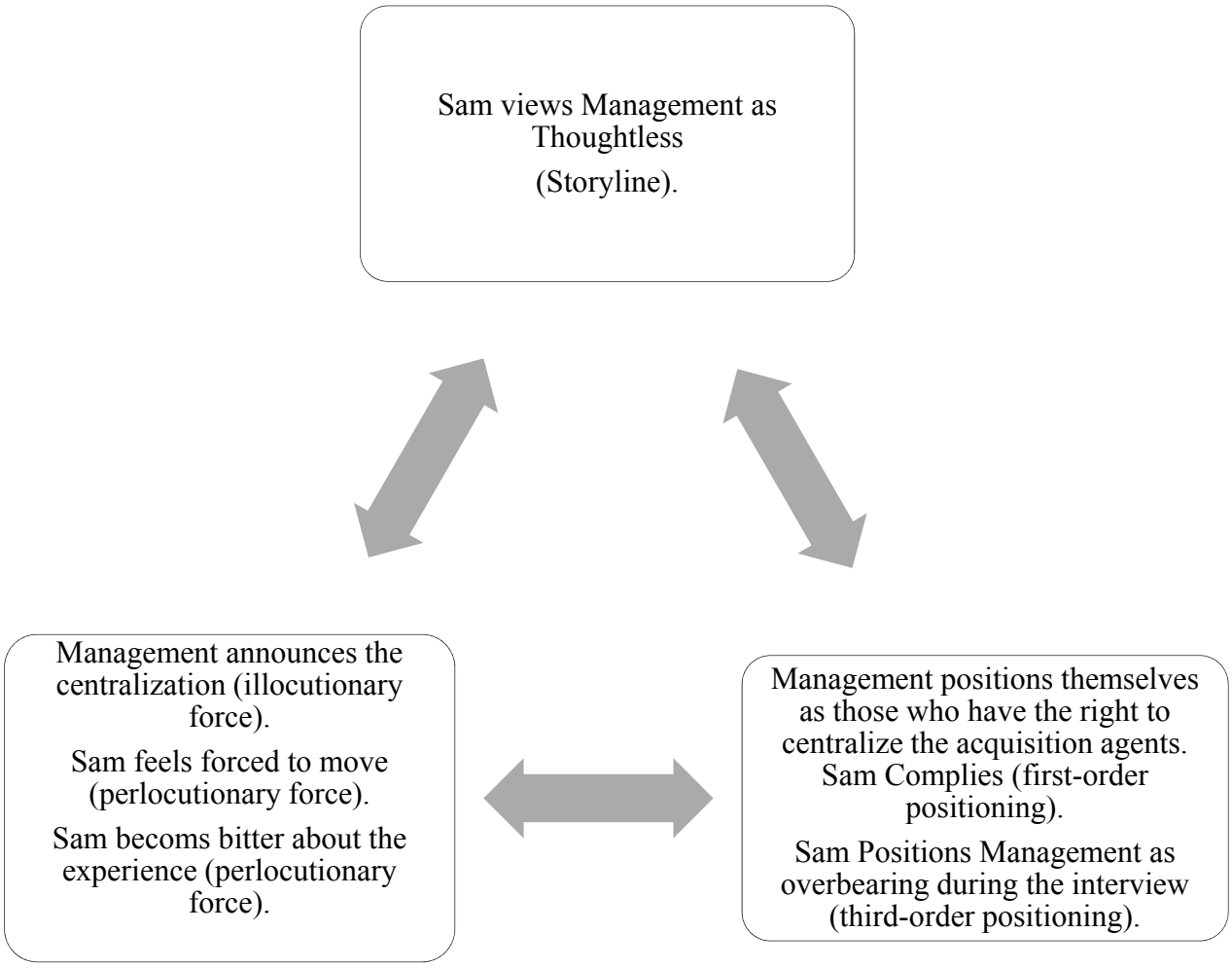

Figure 4. Positioning triad model depicting the interplay of the storyline, position, and speech acts for the conflict between Sam and his management. Adapted from " Introducing Positioning Theory" by R. Harre and L. van Langenhove in *Positioning Theory*, p. 18. Copyright 1999 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Bob, Mark, Sam, and even Rick's wife's perspectives stand in direct contrast to Mary and Rick's perspectives. The positioning triads reveal that Bob and Mark experienced a bit more pushback from the plant. They were placed in a position of explaining the centralization to a plant management team who did not appear to have all the details about the centralization and

who did not appear to agree with moving the acquisition agents off-site. Rick's positioning triad reveals that his wife was not immediately convinced that the centralization would be a good move for the family, even if it meant that Rick would get a promotion. Sam's positioning triad reveals the extent of his bitterness about the centralization. He felt victimized by the experience and he felt management showed little consideration for how the change would affect him and his family. The next section will explore triads for the storyline relating to Employees as Troublemakers.

Conflict Theme 1 Triads: 3. Employees as Troublemakers

Mary, Rick, and Bob seem to support a storyline of *Employees as Troublemakers*; however, this storyline only relates to certain employees. Mary seemed suspicious of one employee, Jim, who asked a lot of questions during the centralization. She mentioned that she was very careful when responding to his questions and also commented that she had the legal department and human resources review her answers before responding. She mentioned Jim previously filed a lot of grievances that did not have any merit. However, in this instance she was cautious because she thought he would likely file a grievance.

During this conflict, Jim challenged the authority of management. In fact, he positioned himself as one who had the right to question management's actions and decisions (an example of second-order positioning). While management did not like this positioning, they did not challenge it because they did respond to his questions. Jim asserted his right to question the centralization and management responded in a way that demonstrated that he did indeed have a right to question their decisions. This did not mean that management changed their decisions; however, it did mean that they felt obligated to respond when he questioned them.

The illocutionary response was that management announced the centralization. In response to this announcement (or the perlocutionary force), Jim began sending questions to management. Jim's questions initiated an exchange and a subsequent reaction from management. Management did respond, but they were very cautious and checked the responses with legal counsel and human resources before sending a reply back to Jim. Figure 5 illustrates the triad for the conflict between Mary and Jim.

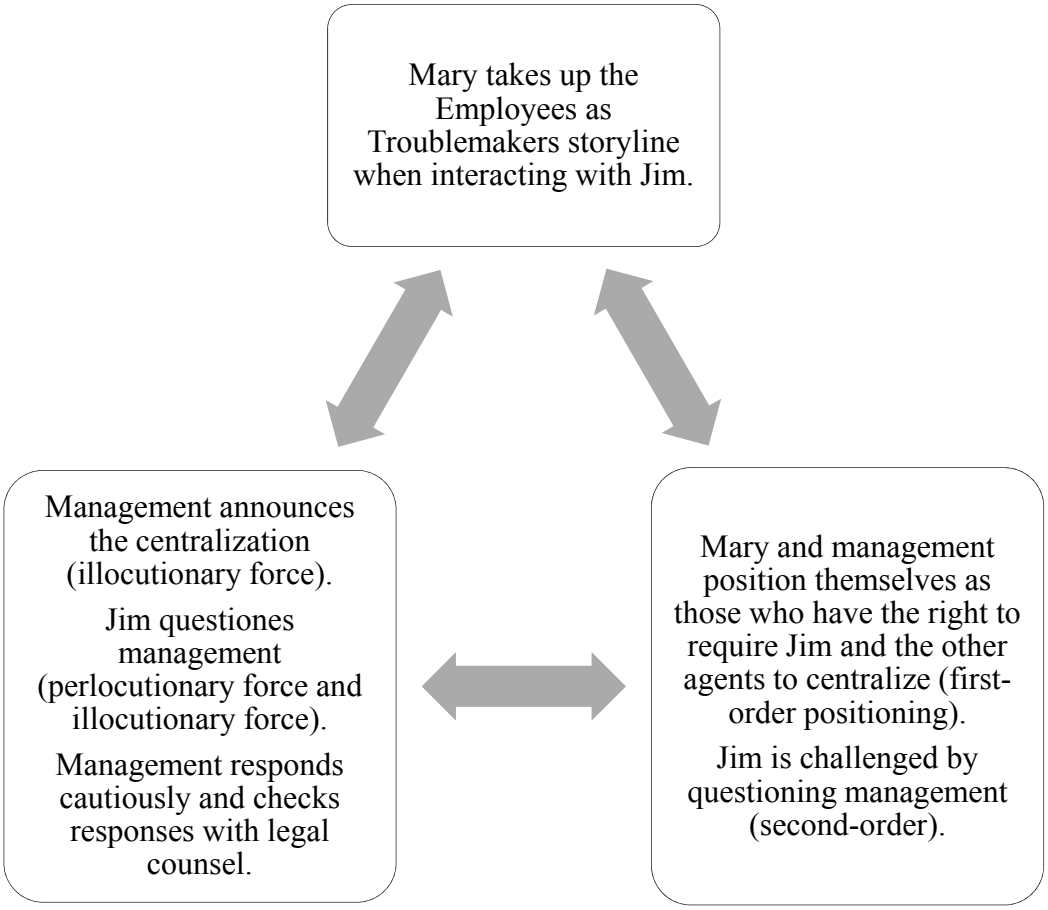

Figure 5. Positioning triad model depicting the interplay of the storyline, position, and speech acts for the conflict between Mary and Jim. Adapted from " Introducing Positioning Theory" by R. Harre and L. van Langenhove in *Positioning Theory*, p. 18. Copyright 1999 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Mary also spoke about another employee, Mike, who needed to be disciplined because he sent inappropriate emails to Ray, one of the managers. Ray complained about the tone of the emails and demanded that Rick address the situation. Rick also talked about this same incident. He mentioned that Mike once worked for Ray and had long been a problem. Rick said that Mike had exhibited many of the same issues before coming to work on his team. He also mentioned that these issues had been overlooked previously but he had to deal with them once the team had been centralized. Mary and Rick dealt with Mike by issuing him a verbal warning.

Mary was part of the disciplinary meeting with Mike. Rick actually led the meeting since Mike reported to Rick. However, during the process Mary positioned herself as the overseer of the entire disciplinary process (first-order) over both Rick and Mike. No one challenged Mary, which affirmed her positioning.

Mike was positioned as a troublemaker. He was known for causing problems for management, which is interesting because his positioning was solidified long before he sent an email to Ray. Management saw him in this way even though Mike was not involved in the interviews, which meant Mike did not have the opportunity to challenge the sentiment that he was a troublemaker.

When Mike sent the email to Ray, he demonstrated first-order positioning by positioning Ray as a peer rather than someone of a higher rank. Essentially, he showed no regard for Ray as a manager. Corporate protocol would suggest that Ray respond in a respectful tone towards a manager who was also a key customer, but Ray resisted this positioning by complaining to Rick and Mary and suggesting that Mike's email was inappropriate. The fact that Rick issued discipline to Mike is another act of second-order positioning. Rick and Mary re-positioned Mike as a subordinate, and as such demanded that he address management with an appropriate tone.

When this event is considered from the vantage point of speech acts, it should be noted that it was actually Ray who initiated the exchange because he told Mike to acquire a certain material the site needed. This is the illocutionary force. The resulting action (or the perlocutionary force) was that Mike sent an inappropriate response back to Ray. Ray, in turn, sent an email to Mary and Rick indicating that he did not appreciate Mike's response. While Ray's email was in response to Mike's email, it also initiated an exchange between Ray, Rick, and Mary, which means it was also an example of illocutionary force. In response to Ray's email, Rick and Mary became concerned about Mike's behavior (perlocutionary force), and they addressed his behavior by issuing a verbal warning.

Rick and Mary's verbal warning initiated an exchange between Mike, Rick, and Mary, so the issuing of a verbal warning is also an illocutionary force as it relates to the exchange between Mary, Rick, and Mike. In response to the warning, Mary explained that Mike became defensive and explained his side. He eventually conceded and apologized to Ray for his email. His subsequent actions are examples of perlocutionary forces because they were reactions to the warning that Mary and Rick issued.

Bob also seemed to be linked to the Employees as Troublemakers storyline. Jim worked on the same site as Bob, and Bob talked about the problems he encountered with Jim prior to and after the centralization was announced. Bob commented that Jim had poor performance, and he specifically spoke about an incident where Jim got into an argument with Jason, a supervisor who reported to Bob. Jim felt the centralization was specifically targeting him to try to get him to retire, so he questioned and challenged the centralization. According to Bob, this escalated to a shouting match between Jim and Jason. Bob said he did not intervene because the confrontation ended.

According to Bob's description of this exchange, Jim was positioned (first-order) as the aggressor because he questioned management's intentions behind the centralization. The fact that Jason did not back down from Jim seems to suggest that he was challenging this positioning (second-order). In other words, Jason's response seems to suggest that Jim did not have the right to question the organization's intentions. Bob did say that Jim eventually resigned himself to the fact that he was going to have to retire, so he did come to accept this positioning.

The illocutionary force in the immediate exchange between the supervisor and Jim was when Jim questioned why the organization was centralizing the acquisition agents. The perlocutionary force was the supervisor's response and the resulting shouting match. However, it is important to point out that Jim's initial speech act also resulted from the organization's announcement of the centralization of the acquisition agents, so it represents yet another ring in the ripple effect caused by the announcement.

What is also interesting about this exchange is that Bob did not intervene. One might suggest that because he was the manager of the organization for Robertson, he had the duty to intervene in such an obvious and public confrontation. It certainly would be an expectation of the company, as is evident in their various training programs for management. However, Bob chose not to intervene. Perhaps this decision represents Bob's own resistance to this expectation of management, which would be a kind of positioning of sorts.

Triads within the Employees as Troublemaker storyline reveal how management interacted with employees who had long been considered problems within the organization. Jim was notorious for filing grievances, so management was cautious when responding to his inquiries about the centralization. Jim even felt confident enough to publicly challenge Jason, a supervisor at Robertson, about the organization's decision to centralize. Mike is another

employee who had been known for behavior issues. This caused some friction between Rick and Ray because Mike used to work with Ray. According to Rick, Ray never disciplined Mike for his behavior, yet demanded immediate discipline when Mike started working for Rick. According to management, Mike did not initially apologize when confronted about his behavior, thereby challenging the idea that his behavior was inappropriate. This further solidified the idea that Mike was a problem employee in management's eyes. The antagonistic nature of the triads for this storyline is very similar to the nature of the triads for the storyline that will be presented next.

Conflict Theme 1 Triads: 4. Supervisor versus Subordinates

The last storyline identified for this particular conflict theme is *Supervisor versus Subordinates*. Like the Employees as Troublemakers storyline, this storyline also establishes two clear sides: the supervisors versus the subordinates. This storyline is most apparent with Sam. Sam did not make a distinction between corporate management and site management. For him, all management could not be trusted. Even though he became a member of management, he still identified with the subordinate rank—the acquisition agents. As an agent, he felt he had no choice in the centralization. From his perspective, he was forced to transfer from Robertson to Harris City.

Sam was bitter about the entire process because he believed management behaved thoughtlessly. As previously discussed, he also felt powerless, and that he had no choice in the centralization. He vehemently opposed the centralization so his conflict was centered on the actual centralization and was aimed at management in general.

Sam talked about a conflict that occurred prior to the centralization. From Sam's perspective, this conflict actually resulted in the centralization, so it is relevant to this discussion.

The conflict related to a grievance he filed in 2006 because he felt the acquisition agents were being asked to do work that was beyond their scope of duties. During that time, Sam and other resource analysts (who were actually classified as acquisition agents) were asked to attend site meetings and report the sites' requests back to management. Sam and the other agents felt this was a management responsibility.

Sam filed the grievance against a previous manager, Stan. During this conflict with management, Sam positioned himself (first-order) as one who had the right and responsibility to oppose what he considered to be management's inappropriate actions. Stan denied the grievance and the proposed resolution. Management's response challenged the position that their actions were inappropriate (second-order).

Interestingly, from Sam's perspective perhaps the main illocutionary force was this grievance he initiated two years earlier because he felt the agents should not have to represent management during site meetings. Sam felt the centralization in 2008 was a consequence of that grievance. From Sam's perspective, this grievance against management was the illocutionary force. By Sam's account, management responded (perlocutionary force) to the grievance he filed in 2006 by denying it. However, management's decision to centralize would also be a perlocutionary force (from his perspective) because he believed it was management's ultimate resolution to get more representation in the site meetings since management also reclassified some of the agent work, created the new RCC positions, and then required them to attend the site meetings. Figure 6 illustrates this triad.

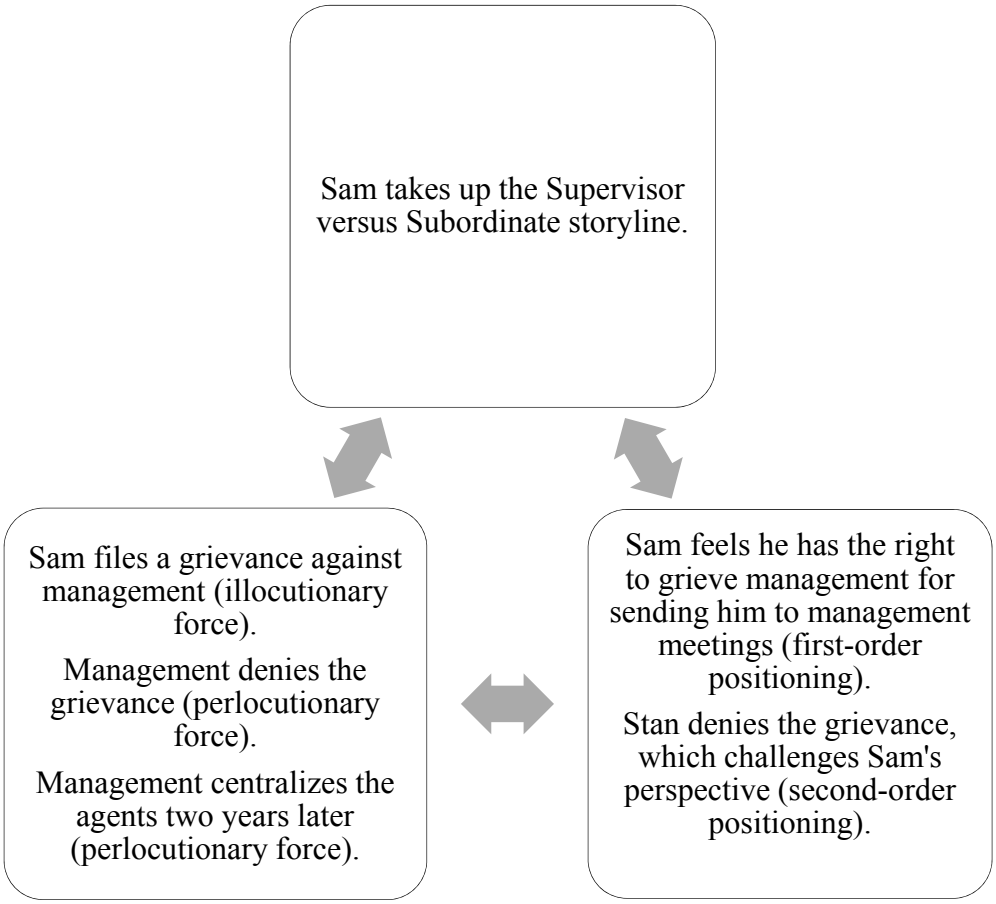

Figure 6. Positioning triad model depicting the interplay of the storyline, position, and speech acts for the 2006 conflict between Sam and Management. Adapted from " Introducing Positioning Theory" by R. Harre and L. van Langenhove in *Positioning Theory*, p. 18. Copyright 1999 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Sam talked about one specific incident that occurred during the reorganization when his immediate supervisor, Jason, questioned him about something he was reading on his email. Sam explained that he was reading a joke and Jason told him that the site was trying to cut back on that kind of thing. Sam related this incident to the centralization because he felt it was further evidence of management's inappropriate behavior and lack of concern for employees.

In this exchange, Jason was positioning himself as the supervisor, one who had the right and authority to question Sam about what he was reading. This is an example of first-order positioning. However, Sam exhibited second-order positioning when he told Jason, "If you don't want me to read it, then get it off my machine." Sam challenged Jason's right to question him about his email by suggesting that Jason would need to prevent the emails from being sent to him before he would stop reading them.

In the incident between Sam and Jason, Sam talked about how Jason confronted him because of something he was looking at on his email. The illocutionary force was that Jason asked Sam what he was looking at and told Sam that the company was trying to get away from time being spent on that sort of thing. As a perlocutionary force, Sam responded by telling Jason that if he did not want him to look at it then he needed to get it off of his machine. Another implied perlocutionary force was that Sam indicated he felt micromanaged.

The triads for the Supervisors versus Subordinates storyline establish two clear sides. It is clear that even when Sam became a part of management, he still identified with the subordinates. He could not see himself as part of a group who he felt behaved so inappropriately against employees, who he positioned as powerless to effectively deal with management's attacks. The exchange described between Sam and Jason further illustrates the divide Sam felt between management and employees. Triads will be presented in the next section for the same storyline, but from the perspective of those who identified more with management.

Conflict Theme 2 Triads: 1. Supervisor versus Subordinate

The second common conflict theme is centered on those who had to operate within new roles after the centralization. This theme shares a similar storyline to the one previously identified for the first conflict theme, *Supervisors versus Subordinates*. Rick was the new site

manager for the centralized group. He had to lead and direct the new acquisition agents in the centralized group and he set new work processes for this group so that they could operate consistently.

An example of first-order positioning for this storyline is that management positioned themselves as those who had the right and authority to select Rick as the supervisor of the centralized group. Some employees, and even other managers, resisted this positioning (second-order) for various reasons, which resulted in conflict. However, some of the employees who did not want to work with Rick did change this opinion after some time, which was third-order positioning.

In his personal interactions with the centralized group, Rick positioned himself as one who had the ability and responsibility to help his employees understand the centralization. He spoke of one employee in particular who did not want to work with him. Rick really wanted to gain this employee's trust because he knew he was well-respected. As an example of first order positioning, he positioned this employee as one who had the power to give him a "chance." This positioning was not challenged by the acquisition agent.

He spoke of another employee who felt she had been overlooked. Rick said she felt she should have been named the manager of the centralized group. Rick explained that he could not change the past, but he would try to provide her with more opportunities in the future. He demonstrated first-order positioning by suggesting that, as the supervisor, he had the power to give her an opportunity. She was accepting of this, and her attitude eventually improved.

Management's announcement that Rick would supervise the group is an example of illocutionary force. The resulting perlocutionary force was that some of the acquisition agents

were displeased because, from Rick's perspective, they felt Rick was too young and inexperienced. Some acquisition agents even felt overlooked.

To resolve the dissension within his group, Rick took it upon himself to talk to the agents that he knew were upset. He spoke to one person who he learned, in Rick's words, "was not interested in working for him." Rick went to this employee and explained the concept of the centralization. He also told him about his education and work experience, which Rick said the employee was surprised to learn. He asked the agent to give him an opportunity and to work for him. This exchange can be seen as the illocutionary force. The fact that the employee was surprised to learn certain things about Rick was the perlocutionary force.

Rick also spoke to another employee who felt she had long been overlooked by management. She told Rick that she had never been given a formal leadership position (illocutionary force). Rick, in turn, felt he better understood the employee's concerns. He told her that even though he could not change the past, he would look for ways to recognize her contributions in the future (perlocutionary force). As a result of Rick's promise, the employee consented to working for Rick (perlocutionary force). This positioning triad is illustrated in Figure 7.

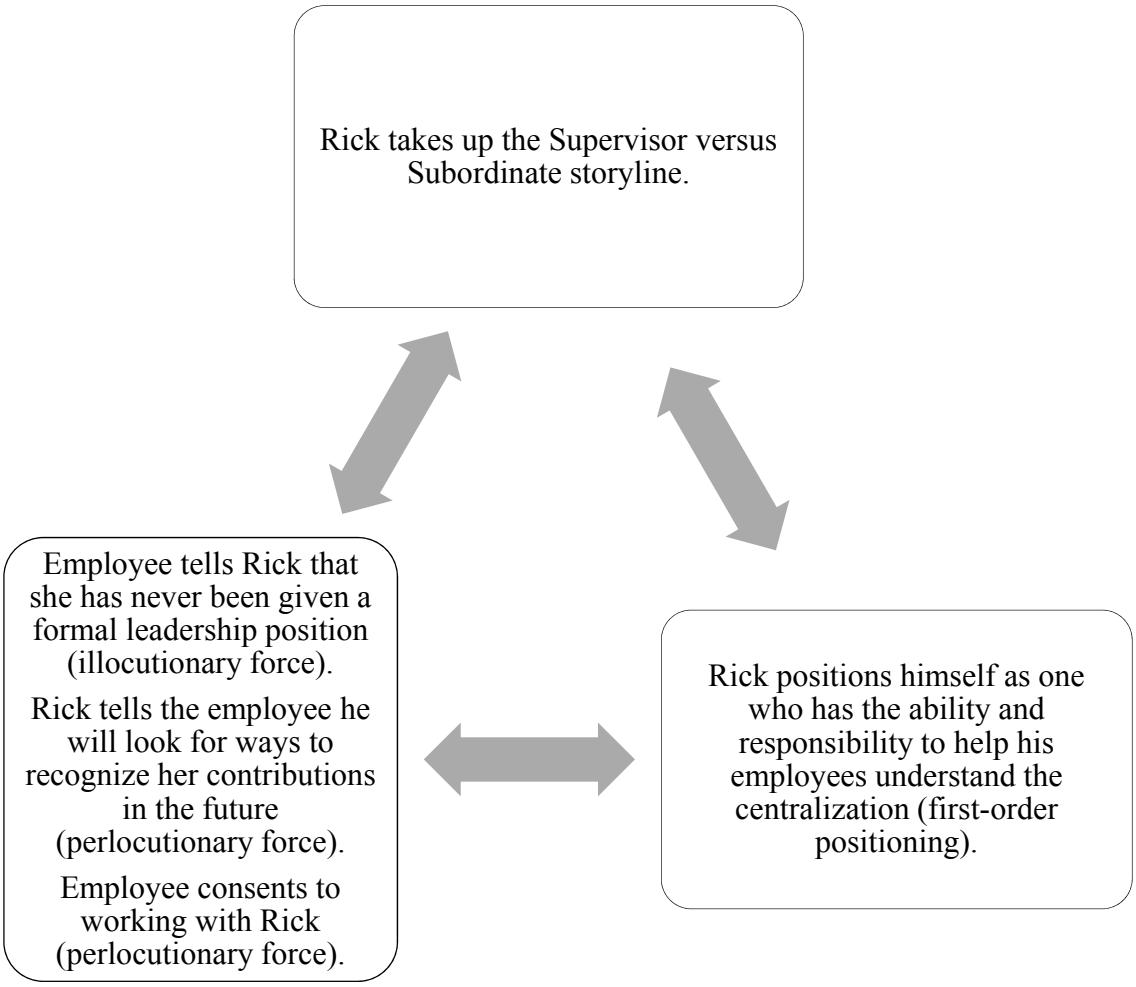

Figure 7 .Positioning triad model depicting the interplay of the storyline, position, and speech acts for the 2006 conflict between Rick and an acquisition agent. Adapted from " Introducing Positioning Theory" by R. Harre and L. van Langenhove in *Positioning Theory*, p. 18. Copyright 1999 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Bob was serving as the manager of Robertson when the centralization was announced, and he had to deal with the disappointed acquisition agents following the announcement. Again, his site was most affected by the centralization since it meant the acquisition agents on his site

would either have to move, retire, or find other jobs. He had to continue to provide leadership for a disgruntled group until the centralization had taken affect.

As a result, Bob had a similar Supervisor versus Employee storyline. Bob recognized the fact that acquisition agents were represented by a union, and much of the relationship was governed by a contract. Bob talked about the deep distrust between labor (i.e. represented employees) and management. When the centralization was announced, Bob said some of the acquisition agents would not accept the change. Again, he did not speak directly about a specific exchange or encounter that he had with one of the acquisition agents; however, in the interview he explained that some of the agents were resistant, which is evidenced by the fact that a grievance was filed. By talking about the agents in the interview, he essentially exhibited third-order positioning.

Corporate management positioned Bob as a subordinate. Bob believed that senior/corporate management had the right to relocate the acquisition agents, so he did not challenge the positioning. Bob said that corporate management did at least share their plans to centralize the acquisition agents with the on-site managers, which represented the illocutionary force. Bob said that as a result the news spread like wildfire to all three sites.

When Bob spoke of the official announcement of the centralization, he said corporate management came on-site to announce the centralization to the acquisition agents and to explain the new positions that would be created as a result of the centralization. This was the illocutionary force. Bob supported the change and felt somewhat relieved because some of the employees he had experienced problems with would be leaving (perlocutionary force). He was also relieved that corporate management made the announcement, which meant he would not have to tell the agents at his site. Other examples of perlocutionary force were that the

announcement was not received well by the acquisition agents, according to Bob. He mentioned that there was a slowdown in production because there were a number of meetings that occurred outside the normal routine. He also said that there was dissension among the acquisition agents.

Bob said that some acquisition agents alleged that the centralization was part of a management scheme to get rid of older, less productive acquisition agents (illocutionary force). As a result, he said these allegations disturbed him (perlocutionary force). He also mentioned that some of the agents confided in him (illocutionary force). Bob saw those who confided in him as good employees, and not part of a clique or gossip circle, which was also a perlocutionary force.

Bob said that during the meetings discussing the centralization, he felt his role was to bring levity to the situation, so he would make a joke to break the ice. In other words he would initiate an action to try to relieve tension in interactions between employees and management. The jokes represented the illocutionary force. He also noted that his jokes were not always well-received and were sometimes resented (perlocutionary force).

Mark led the new RCCs for Robertson after the centralization. This was a completely new role for the organization and for his site. He had to set expectations and monitor performance for this new group. He also coached and corrected performance whenever the new coordinators were not meeting his expectations.

Mark also talked about those who applied for the newly created RCC positions. Some acquisition agents applied for these jobs but were not selected. Because they were not selected, they were positioned as unqualified (first-order positioning). Mark mentioned that some employees who were not selected openly disagreed with the decision and expressed their disappointment (second-order positioning).

From the storyline of Supervisor versus Subordinates, Mark talked about the challenge he experienced in getting the new RCCs up to speed, which involved setting expectations for the RCCs. Mark told the coordinators that they had the authority to speak on behalf of the organization, commit resources, and make decisions. This is first-order positioning because Mark explained their new roles and expectations to them. He also simultaneously positioned himself as their manager, one who has the authority to set these roles and expectations.

Despite his attempts to set these new expectations for the coordinators, the coordinators resisted. They question whether it was their responsibility to act on behalf of management. Mark also said they seemed to focus more on the hope that the grievance would overturn the reclassification, another symbol of their resistance to their new roles. This resistance would be considered second-order positioning.

The act of explaining the RCC's expectations to those who were selected into the new positions would be considered the illocutionary force. Again, the new RCCs did not want to perform their new roles. Mark also said they did not understand the new roles and expectations. Both of these reactions would be considered the perlocutionary force.

Mark said the new RCCs told him that they filed a grievance against the reclassification of the positions and expected to go back under the union. This was an illocutionary force. Mark, in turn, explained to them that they were expected to perform the expectations of the job as described until the grievance was resolved, which was the perlocutionary force.

In relating to the new RCCs and trying to get them to understand their new role, Mark noted that the new acquisition agents were reluctant to challenge plant management in the site meetings. Mark felt this was a critical role since it involved assuring realistic expectations were set for when materials could be delivered. There was one coordinator in particular who struggled

in the area of pushing back on plant management when their expectations were unrealistic. Mark allowed this coordinator to shadow him during a meeting. He saw himself as a teacher who had to help the RCCs, and this coordinator in particular, understand their new role (first-order positioning).

Mark spoke about a tense exchange he had with the plant maintenance manager, who insisted that some material be available within a timeframe that Mark strongly felt could not be met. During this exchange, Mark positioned himself (first-order) as one who had the authority to speak to the availability of materials and demand that the material be removed from the schedule. The maintenance manager challenged this position by refusing to remove the materials from the schedule (second-order). Mark reasserted his authority and cited policy, causing the maintenance manager to concede.

Mark told the maintenance manager to take the equipment off the schedule, an example of illocutionary force. The maintenance manager initially refused (perlocutionary force). Mark initiated an exchange with the workweek manager and asked him if he wanted to keep the material on the schedule, even though keeping it would violate a specific policy (illocutionary force). The workweek manager agreed that it should be taken off the schedule (perlocutionary force). Another perlocutionary force was that the RCCs were amazed by this exchange.

The RCC told Mark that he could not believe the exchange he witnessed. He also said that he did not think he could do the same thing, which was the illocutionary force. Mark reiterated the expectations of the coordinator position and in response (perlocutionary force) told the coordinator that was the level he needed him to reach.

As mentioned previously, Sam did not feel as if he had any other choice but to operate within his new role, so in many respects he felt management was against him and the other

employees. Sam felt management forced him to centralize, and as a subordinate, he felt he did not have any authority to refuse the centralization. He had to follow the order from management to transfer. Once part of the centralized group, he had to comply with the new work processes.

Again, Sam saw the entire centralization as a conflict. From his perspective, management was positioned (first-order) as having the right to require the Acquisitions function to move to a centralized location. According to Sam, he and the other agents at his site were resistant to management's action and filed a grievance. The grievance represents second-order positioning because they were, in a sense, trying to renegotiate this positioning. However, in the end, Sam and the other agents were unsuccessful. Sam and the other agents resigned themselves to the fact that they would be centralized. This did not mean that Sam accepted the positioning; instead, Sam felt victimized by management because he had to live with something he could not accept.

The speech acts represented in the centralization would be similar to what has been presented earlier. That is, the announcement of the centralization would be the illocutionary force. In response to the announcement, Sam became upset and bitter. He also filed a grievance, which are all examples of perlocutionary force.

Again, triads in this particular storyline were presented more from the management perspective because a few of the research participants had to help employees operate in new roles. Rick's triads reveal that his approach to helping employees learn their new roles was to position them in a way that recognized their skills and abilities. He knew he was younger than many of them, so he wanted to let them know he recognized and appreciated their abilities. Bob also noticed the divide between employees and management. Bob's triads revealed a distinction between him and corporate management. He felt like more of a subordinate to corporate management and tended to take more neutral positions in meetings between employees and

management. He viewed his role as helping to lighten the situation between himself and management. Mark's triad reveals that he felt he needed to be a teacher when trying to get his new RCCs to operate within their new roles. He had to teach them how to be assertive when representing the organization during the plant meetings. Just as there are distinctions between supervisors and subordinates, there are also distinctions between corporate and the sites, and these triads will be explored in the following section.

Conflict Theme 2 Triads: 2. Site versus Corporate

The last storyline for this particular theme of Operating in New Roles is *Site versus Corporate*. There was a distinction made between site employees and corporate employees after the centralization and as the employees (including management) were assuming their new roles. The complete triad for all participants related to this particular storyline will be presented.

Mark's interview seemed most to represent the Site versus Corporate storyline. He suggested corporate acquisition agents did not completely understand the urgency of requests since they were no longer on-site. This came out when Mark discussed the acquisition agents' requests for a separate expediting order from the Acquisition Engineering group, which was on-site. There was a disagreement between site and corporate because Mark felt they did not need to provide a separate order for expediting materials. Also, this was not something that was done or requested when the acquisition agents were located on-site.

Mark spoke about the attitudes of the acquisition agents and the challenges he experienced after they were centralized. As Mark talked about his perspective of the acquisition agents who had been centralized, he positioned them as detached. This would be considered third-order positioning since it occurred outside of the actual context of the event to which he was referring.

Mark also talked about an emergent issue of a power outage at his site. In talking about this experience, he positioned himself as having to help others understand the urgency of the emergency. Again, since his perspective was somewhat reflective and occurred outside of the context of the actual experience, this would be considered third-order positioning.

When asked about a specific situation, Mark spoke about a situation where he was at odds with the centralized acquisition agents who requested additional approvals to have materials expedited. The conflict centered on the notion that the site believed additional approval was unnecessary and was covered in the initial request; however, the acquisition agents believed they needed additional approval to expedite material since an additional fee would be incurred. The RCCs located at the sites felt that the additional request for approvals to expedite only slowed down the process of getting the materials to the site.

As Mark spoke of this conflict, it seemed that the acquisition agents tried to position the RCCs and site management as having the responsibility to give them the authority to expedite material, and that they were somewhat delinquent in authorizing the order. This is an example of first-order positioning. The RCCs and site management challenged both that the acquisition agents even needed approval to expedite the material and that they were delinquent. This challenge of the acquisition agents' assertion is second-order positioning.

The initial request to secure the materials was the illocutionary force. The agents' response was to request an additional order, which was the perlocutionary force. However, this request also initiated a reaction. The site saw the additional request as unnecessary and a problem. In response (the perlocutionary force), they said that the agents already had the order and they felt the acquisition agents were wasting time by demanding another order.

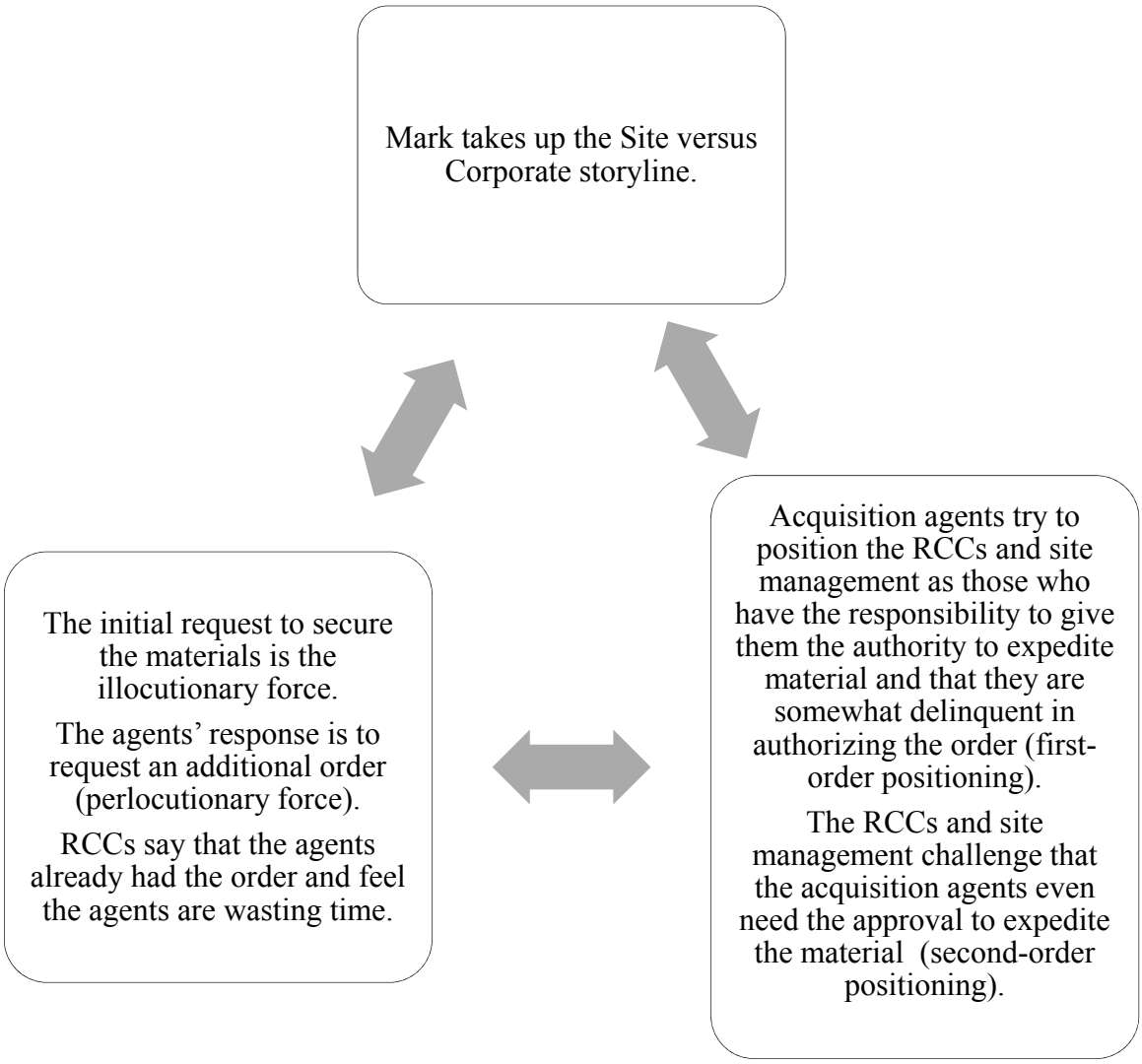

Figure 8. Positioning triad model depicting the interplay of the storyline, position, and speech acts for the conflict between the RCCs and the acquisition agents. Adapted from " Introducing Positioning Theory" by R. Harre and L. van Langenhove in *Positioning Theory*, p. 18. Copyright 1999 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Rick also seemed to suggest a Site versus Corporate storyline. This was primarily when he spoke about the interaction he had with his peers who were managers at the sites. Rick had to interface with these managers and respond to their complaints or requests because his group

provided acquisition services for the sites. The conflict previously mentioned regarding Mike (who sent the inappropriate email to Ray) also represents this storyline; however, the positioning looks slightly different when one considers the positioning between Rick and Ray.

Ray was upset because one of Rick's employees sent him an inappropriate email. Rick noted that Ray did not have this same set of expectations when the employee worked for Ray at the site. However, now that the employee worked at a corporate location, and, more importantly, for Rick, Rick felt Ray's expectations changed. When Ray complained to Rick and Mary, he positioned (first-order) Rick as having the responsibility of making Mike behave. Rick did not necessarily challenge this positioning.

When Rick spoke to Ray about the situation, he requested previous disciplinary documentation from Ray because Mike used to work for Ray. Rick positioned the manager (first-order) as one who had the knowledge to provide information about the employee's disciplinary background, and as one who had the responsibility to have this information documented. Ray did not have the information or the documentation; however, this was not a challenge of this positioning.

While it was apparent in the interview that Rick was resentful of the way that Ray handled the situation, he did address the situation by disciplining Mike. This affirms Ray's positioning of Rick. The reason this example seems to fit better in the Site versus Corporate storyline is because Ray did not send the email only to Rick. He sent the email to both Rick and Mary and referenced Mike as "one of Rick's employees."

Rick also mentioned that some of these managers would call their former employees, who were now working for Rick, and would check up on him. By doing so, they positioned Rick as less than qualified to be the manager of the centralized group. They positioned themselves as

having the right to check up on him. These are both examples of third-order positioning because they occurred when Rick was not present. However, the acquisition agents shared the information with Rick, which positions him as a friend. This is an example of first-order positioning. Rick mentioned that upper-level management eventually spoke to the managers, asked them why they were checking up on Rick, and asked them to stop. By doing this, the managers were repositioned as those who did not have the right to check up on Rick. Since the positioning occurred outside of the actual exchange, it should also be considered third-order positioning. Also, Rick positioned site management as uncooperative in the interview, which is another example of third-order positioning.

As stated previously, Ray sent Mike a request, and Mike sent an inappropriate response back to Ray. The fact that Ray sent the request was the illocutionary force. Mike's response was the perlocutionary force. Ray sent the email to Rick and questioned him about what he intended to do about Mike, which was an illocutionary force. Rick felt Ray was overreacting because Mike used to work for Ray and exhibited the same behavior then (perlocutionary force). As a result, Rick decided to issue Mike a verbal warning (perlocutionary force). Rick requested that Ray provide any previous documentation on Mike's discipline (illocutionary force). Ray told Rick that he didn't have any previous documentation (perlocutionary force). Ultimately, Rick gave Mike a verbal warning, which was coded as a perlocutionary force because it was really in response to Ray asking Rick what he planned to do about the situation.

Rick also spoke about the challenge he experienced with the other managers who he felt were resentful of his position as the supervisor of the centralized acquisition agents. He said the managers would call and check up on him (illocutionary force). He also mentioned that one manager copied the acquisition agents on an exchange between him and the manager that he felt

should have been kept private (illocutionary force). He told the manager that their issues should be kept private (perlocutionary force). Also as a result, Rick was offended and felt attacked, so he sought the support of mentors and other members of management to help him deal with his peers at the site. These are examples of perlocutionary force. However, Rick's request for support from senior management is also an example of an illocutionary force. As a result, senior management asked Rick for documented evidence that the managers were checking up on him. According to Rick, they also shared with him that they were happy with his work. Finally, they asked the managers at the site to stop undermining Rick's authority by calling to check up on him. These are examples of perlocutionary force.

Finally, Bob also seemed to speak from a Site versus Corporate theme in his interview. He talked about how site management was not consulted when the decision to centralize was made. He said they were only told that the centralization would happen and were not asked for input. In this sense, site management was positioned as being subject to corporate management. In other words, corporate management had authority over site management.

Bob seemed accepting of this positioning; he even spoke about how he appreciated that corporate management took care of most of the administrative tasks that were necessary in order for the centralization to occur. However, as he talked about it in the interview, he did demonstrate a kind of third-order positioning by referring to corporate management as "administrative shields" and site management as "doers" of the actual core work.

When Bob talked about actual exchanges between corporate management and the acquisition agents, he said he felt his role really was to diffuse the tense situation by offering a joke to try to lighten the mood. Bob positioned himself as having the responsibility to act as a mediator between corporate management and the acquisition agents (first-order positioning).

This is not a role Bob explicitly stated to his colleagues or the acquisition agents, although he did mention that some of the agents did not appreciate his jokes. Their resistance to his joking can be considered second-order positioning because they rejected his attempts to lighten the mood, which was a rejection of his attempt to position himself as having the right to lighten the mood.

Bob also talked about how even those who did not work directly for the Acquisitions organization did not seem to trust corporate management's decision to centralize the acquisition agents. The site was concerned that corporate management did not really understand their needs, and they were also concerned they would not get the same quality of service. By doing so, they positioned corporate management as being out of touch.

One thing that Bob did feel was his responsibility during the centralization was explaining the change to plant management. The illocutionary force was that he said he talked to employees in different organizations about the centralization. As a result, some understood that the move was to be more efficient (perlocutionary force). Bob said he explained to site personnel that they would no longer be able to contact acquisition agents on the site. In one specific incident, Bob recalled that the maintenance manager called and wanted to know who he should contact, which was also an illocutionary force. While he did not mention the specifics of his response, Bob said the centralization forced management on the site in different organizations to move out of their comfort zone (perlocutionary force).

In conclusion, Mark, Rick, and Bob also took up the Site versus Corporate storyline. Mark dealt with the frustration of having to deal with the acquisition agents once they were centralized. From his perspective, because they were off-site they did not appear to understand the urgencies happening on-site. They required additional approvals, which Mark felt they did not need when the site needed materials quickly. Mark also experienced one of his greatest

emergencies, a power outage, after the agents were centralized. The site needed materials quickly, yet the agents who needed to purchase the materials were in another city. Rick had to deal with peers who he felt were trying to undermine his authority. His agents shared with him that management was calling to check up on him. This was a challenge of Rick's qualifications. However, the fact that the acquisition agents shared the information with Rick positions him as a friend in relation to his agents. Bob had to explain the centralization to plant management; however, he was not part of the decision to centralize. The plant positioned him as a representative of the organization, and as one who should be able to explain the decision. While Bob was uncomfortable with this positioning, he did not challenge it. Bob did, however, make a distinction between himself and management, and between site management and corporate management.

This concludes the presentation of the triads for each conflict theme. In summary, the chapter focused on critical events, common conflict themes, main characters, primary issues, storylines, positions, and speech acts. The perspectives of the employees revealed how they felt they were positioned and explained why they approached a particular situation the way they did. The next section will focus on a discussion of these findings.

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore how positioning theory might be used in an analysis of the assumptions of individuals engaged in a conflict within an organizational setting. The underlying assumption was that positioning theory might serve as an effective method for uncovering the socially constructed nature of conflict from the participants' perspective. This is an important aspect related to my practice as an organizational development consultant since I am often called upon to help neutralize these conflicts. For the OD consultant, identifying the nature of the conflict is paramount to ensuring that all issues are addressed; however, the diagnostic phase is commonly overlooked in conflict literature.

I used a critical events narrative approach to address the research question and identify the storylines, positions, and speech acts evident in participants' stories of conflict within the context of a recent reorganization. I interviewed five managers at Utico about their experience during an organizational restructuring. I analyzed interview data in terms of critical, like, and other events, and also identified common conflict themes, primary issues, and main characters. Next, I identified the storylines, positions, and speech acts as they related to conflict. Finally, I explored positioning triads for a deeper understanding of the conflict that occurred.

The remaining chapter will summarize the findings presented in chapter four, followed by a discussion of contributions to positioning theory. This will be followed by a discussion of how positioning theory can be used as a tool for the OD practitioner. The chapter will end with a discussion of implications for future research and conclusions.

Summary of the Findings

The positioning theory component of the data analysis yielded two common conflict themes. The first theme related to whether or not participants were for or against the centralization. Some research participants were strongly in favor of the centralization and felt it was within the best interest of the organization. Others strongly opposed the centralization, or at least the way it was implemented. Much of the conflict resided in these opposing views.

The second theme dealt with conflict that occurred as a result of individuals having to operate within new roles. This involved individuals adjusting to new relationships, new responsibilities, and, for some, a new setting. The centralized acquisition agents had to learn to interact with one another since they would all be located at one central site. The manager also had to learn how to interact with the centralized acquisition agents, though he did not know a lot of them. The individuals who filled the newly created RCC positions had to adjust to their new roles. The new RCCs performed work similar to what the acquisition agents used to do; however, the positions were classified as manager specialist positions as opposed to union represented positions, which resulted in conflict when the acquisition agents filed a grievance to challenge this classification.

Because of this new classification, the new RCCs could speak on behalf of management and commit to the availability of resources. As acquisition agents, however, their role was primarily administrative. The agents would go to the meetings but could not make commitments on behalf of the organization; instead they had to report needs and issues back to management. Since the RCC role was similar to the acquisition agent role, the new RCCs questioned whether management even had the contractual right or authority to create the RCC job and classify it as a management specialist position. Many who had been selected as RCCs were once acquisition

agents. Once in their new role, a manager at one particular site had problems getting his employees to operate within that new role. They were timid about speaking up in site meetings on behalf of the organization, though the supervisor desperately wanted them to understand that this was now their responsibility.

Next, positioning theory triads were presented for each conflict theme. The triads included storylines, positions, and speech acts. Conflict Theme 1 had the storylines of Management as Conscientious Business Leaders, Thoughtless Management, Employees as Troublemakers, and Supervisors versus Subordinates. Conflict Theme 2 had two storylines: Supervisor versus Subordinates and Site versus Corporate. Positions and speech acts for each storyline were then identified.

Discussion of the Findings

The discussion of the findings will be presented with a focus on the contributions of positioning theory in several significant contexts. I will begin with discussing how positioning theory contributed to my understanding of the conflict relating to the centralization. I find this to be important in terms of helping to improve my practice within my immediate organization. Next, I will explore advancements to the theory because I hope this study will add to the dialogue concerning the use and applicability of positioning theory in various contexts. Finally, I will consider contributions of positioning theory to the larger field of organizational development.

Contributions to understanding conflict relating to the centralization.

Positioning theory contributed to my understanding of the conflict that existed within the centralization in five ways: 1) The analysis provided a rich understanding of the participants' experience during the centralization. 2) The analysis helped to explain what participants felt their

options were during the centralization, which revealed what they perceived their power to be during the centralization. 3) The picture of the centralization was more complete. 4) I was able to better see what fueled the conflict. 5) The analysis helped me to see how a single incident spawned multiple events. Each one of these benefits would have been difficult to achieve using the more traditional forms of conflict management and resolution because, based on the review of the literature, many studies do not consider the perspectives of those involved when diagnosing the issue(s). Conflict literature seems more concerned with the treatment and management of conflict than with understanding how it came to exist. These are five reasons why positioning theory benefits conflict theory, and they will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Rich Understanding.

As discussed in chapter two, conflict literature largely ignores the diagnostic phase of managing and resolving conflict (Rahim, 2002). As a result, conflict literature does not consider the perspectives of those engaged in the conflict. One benefit of using positioning theory as a tool for analyzing conflict, however, is that identifying the triads provides a rich understanding of the perspectives of the individuals engaged in the conflict, as well as a rich description of the dynamic nature of the conflict itself. Via the positioning triad, the research participants revealed their perspectives relating to different issues that arose during the centralization. For instance, Mary took up the Management as Conscientious business leader storyline and explained the decision to centralize to her new vice president who was familiar with a decentralized model. She positioned herself as someone who knew what was in the best interest of the organization, despite her new vice president's formal role as her superior. Mary also positioned herself as a defender of the success of the centralization, which led to a conflict with Ruth. Mary attempted

to exclude Ruth from setting up the acquisition agents' space because Ruth had a reputation for sharing confidential information.

This richer understanding provides a deeper explanation for how and why a conflict exists, while other studies merely describe the setting. For instance, Phillips and Chester (1979) suggest that conflict is caused by communication, personal relationships, and power struggles. This is only surface-level information. Similarly, Morrill (1991) pointed to communication as a way of explaining how conflict should be negotiated within the organizational setting. In this study, positioning theory reveals that Mary's conflict is a social construction. The situation is not fixed or unchangeable. For instance, her conflict with Ruth existed in part because of her perception of her rights and duty in the organization, and how she negotiated these rights and duties in social interactions. This illustrates Davies and Harre's (1999) concept of the joint construction of speech action. Mary took up the storyline of Management as Conscientious Business Leader, and acting out this storyline led to conflict with those who did not understand the centralization, or could interfere with the effectiveness of the organization. Understanding how Mary's conflict came to exist helps to provide some guidance for how to resolve or manage the issue. As a result, it is also important to understand the perspectives of the individuals who were engaged in the conflict because these perspectives need to be addressed if any resolution is to be successful.

In their Georgetown study where the community was at odds with the students, Harre and Slocum (2003) found that one must first understand the prevailing storylines from the participants' perspectives in order for new storylines to be created. This is important in terms of addressing the storylines the participants feel are most important to them. It also informs which new storylines need to be created to resolve the conflict and acknowledge the idea that a new

reality can be created just as the previous reality was created. This rich understanding also reveals something about the type of choices individuals felt were available to them, which will be explored next.

Limited options

The choices the research participants felt they had available to them in the midst of the conflict became clearer through the analysis of this data. The Wallace (2001) study of how women were positioned in organizations via management's discourse and their practices found that the work women did had low value within the organization. Wallace (2001) also found that the way management positioned women limited the women's access to certain opportunities. I also found that some participants in this study felt that their options were severely limited.

For instance, Sam felt he had no choice in the centralization. His feelings about his options became clearer when considering his reflection on the experience and how he positioned himself in that reflection. Sam's reflection indicated that he felt he was positioned as a subordinate. Management did not ask for his ideas and he felt he was forced to centralize. Sam opposed the centralization, but felt there was little he could do. He positioned management as having all the power and he positioned himself and the other acquisition agents as powerless victims who were subject to management's edicts.

The way Sam positioned himself caused other options to become invisible. Quitting was not an option. Even though he applied for and was offered one of the RCC positions, which would have allowed him to stay at Robertson, he did not accept that position because he was not offered a significant salary increase. As a result, Sam felt the new position was not a viable position, and even though he was upset about the fact that the centralization would cause him to move to another city, he felt he had no other alternative. In his own words, he felt management

was taking him away from his family, friends, and community. Sam seemed to feel powerless to do anything in the situation other than follow management's command.

In terms of speech acts, Sam's perspective is also related to how the centralization was announced and implemented. The act of announcing the centralization was one of telling. Management did not consult with the agents (and even some members of management) regarding whether the organization should centralize, and neither was the centralization up for negotiation. Sam referred to the centralization as a forced transfer during his interview, which described his perspective of the organization's decision. As Wallace (2001) recognized in her own study, management's announcement may have perpetuated Sam's perspective that his opportunities were limited. However, this contradicts the actual perspective management hoped individuals would take.

Management provided three alternatives when the centralization was announced. Individuals could accept the direct transfer notice and relocate to Harris City, they could apply for and pursue alternative employment within the immediate organization or the company, or they could retire. This supports a similar notion that Dennen (2007) noted when she found that teachers' espoused values and beliefs contradicted how they were actually positioning their students. Dennen found that teachers felt they positioned their students in such a way that their opinions were equally valued in an online classroom; however, the students actually regarded the teacher's perspective above other students. Rarely did students reject their own positioning, even though the teachers felt they made the students aware of the right to do so.

In the same manner, management thought that by making the agents aware of their rights, they would see the opportunities available to them. However, the way these options were presented and discussed (the agents were not asked but told they would be centralizing) had the

opposite effect. Sam, who serves as a representative of the agents in this study, felt he had no options available, evidenced by the way he positioned himself as a powerless subordinate when taking up the Supervisor versus Subordinate storyline. These dueling perspectives also demonstrate the thorough view of the conflict that can be achieved when using positioning theory, which will be explored next.

Complete picture.

Positioning theory analysis helps to create a more complete picture of the conflicts that existed in the centralization. Again, this is something I found to be lacking in conflict literature. Mary (who probably most represented corporate management) did not mention the personal impact of the centralization at all. Her primary focus was on the efficiency of the organization, demonstrated by her taking up of the Management as Conscientious Business Leader storyline. She did briefly mention that the agents had an option to move, but this statement was not consistent with Sam's attitude and beliefs. Mary's sense of agency is one possible reason that her perspective differed from Sam's. Mary tended to speak from a position of authority, and she felt she had the necessary knowledge and experience to make decisions she deemed were in the best interest of the organization. She even demonstrated this when her new vice president expressed a different perspective than her own. As has been previously discussed, Mary stood firm in her convictions that the centralization was in the best interest of the organization.

When considering speech acts for Mary's conflict with Ruth, Mary acknowledged that it was her decision to exclude Ruth from the process, which ultimately, from Mary's perspective, led to the rift in their relationship. Ruth confronted Mary, but Mary offered no explanation as to why she excluded her. Mary mentioned that Ruth did not know why she was excluded because she was never given any feedback. She also indicated that Ruth stopped speaking to her.

Mary viewed Ruth from the storyline of Employees as Troublemakers. Harre and Slocum (2003) found within their own study of a dispute between Georgetown and the surrounding community that the storyline holds certain expectations. This is because people tend to position others and use discourse in a manner consistent with the metaphor perpetuated by the storyline. In light of Mary and Ruth, it stands to reason that Ruth would exhibit troublemaking tendencies by sharing confidential information if she was treated like a troublemaker, which is what Mary did when she excluded Ruth from the meeting with the facilities representative.

Ruth's expectations regarding her role in the organization and how management viewed her behavior were at odds in this situation. Management felt Ruth could not keep a secret, so they tried to exclude her from the centralization process. By excluding Ruth from the meeting, they essentially positioned her as an outsider. Ruth came to the meeting anyway, which was a violation of management's expectations, and perpetuated the idea that Ruth was a troublemaker. Ruth eventually left the organization and still continues to have a strained relationship with Mary to this day.

Fueling conflicts.

The situation between Mary and Ruth also serves as an example of how the positions participants assume fuel conflicts. For instance, when a person assumed a position that seemed inappropriate within a social context, or did not position him or herself accordingly, a conflict ultimately followed. This was most noticeable in the situation where Mike sent the inappropriate email to Ray. From management's perspective, Mike did not have a right to send the email because he was a subordinate and should not have addressed a supervisor (or customer) in that way. From management's perspective, Mike violated the conventional rights and duties of an employee interacting with his supervisor. The particular position Mike assumed in this situation

was inappropriate, and as a consequence he was issued a written warning. This act of discipline was a way of denying Mike access to a certain position. In one sense, Mike tried to position himself as Ray's equal or peer. In another, he tried to position Ray as a co-worker rather than a customer. Management determined that neither positioning was appropriate and repositioned Mike as a subordinate and service-provider to Ray.

Conversely, Sam felt management violated an unstated expectation to show due consideration for their employees when they relocated the acquisition agents to Harris City. From Sam's perspective, management's moral obligation to put their employees' concerns above all else outweighed any formal right or even duty they had to centralize the function. To require the centralization seemed inappropriate to Sam and violated his expectations of management, thereby fueling the conflict.

Multiple events resulting from one incident.

Existing conflict literature has treated organizations as linear systems. However, conflict is often much more complex, dynamic, and nonlinear (Andrade et al., 2008). Positioning theory analysis helps to account for the complexity of the conflict represented in the centralization. Part of this complexity stems from how individuals made sense of the exchange that occurred. This is better understood via the lens of storylines, positions, and speech acts. As previously stated, the storyline an individual took up affected how the individual interpreted what was occurring. Sam took up the Management as Thoughtless storyline, and his description depicted someone who felt powerless to change his situation. Conversely, Rick took up the storyline of Management as Conscientious Business Leaders. While he was also relocated as a result of the situation, Rick felt more in control of his situation because management involved him in their decision to centralize. Rick felt positioned as more of a peer in relation to management. The centralization

impacted Sam and Rick in two very different ways, which resonates with the notion identified by Andrade et al. (2008) that an organization is not a fixed and linear system. This particular organization held true to the idea that it was a complex environment and that it would be difficult to predict the impact of conflict, as would be true for a fixed and linear system.

The study also essentially changed how I visualized positioning theory. Harre and van Langenhove (1999) describe positioning theory in terms of a triad, conjuring images of a triangular representation of the model. Perhaps this is adequate for describing the interaction of a limited group focused on one specific incident, but it did not demonstrate how multiple conflicts can all be connected or related, or even how there may be other triads within one prevailing triad. In this study, however, there were a number of different people who were engaged in a number of different conflicts, and I began to see more of a circular, rippling pattern emerge. It was as if someone were dropping a stone in the pool of human interaction. Each ring in the ripple was distinguished by a specific triad, but represented a unique conflict for the participants. As a result, positioning theory seemed to serve as an effective tool in tracing back conflict to its point of origin from the participant's perspective. It helps to move the analysis beyond simple cause and effect. The theory provides richer description of the complexities of social interaction by making multiple reactions to the same conflict more apparent.

Because of the centralization announcement, Bob talked about the decreased productivity and tense exchanges the supervisors on his site had with the acquisition agents who were relocating. This also influenced the way he acted in certain situations. Bob felt the need to keep the mood light to help ease tensions in meetings, so he tended to offer jokes. He had to deal with pressure from his peers, who seemed to resent that Bob was named over the centralized group. Bob commented that the other managers would call and check up on him and frustrated his

efforts to supervise the centralized agents. Bob felt that not all the acquisition agents who would be working with him wanted to work with him, and he even suffered in his personal life because his wife did not want to move. Bob and Mark had to deal with the management team on-site, who could not understand why the organization decided to centralize the agents. They often took up the position of those who had to explain and justify the centralization to plant management.

The announcement spawned a number of different conflicts, which can be pictorially represented in Figure 9.

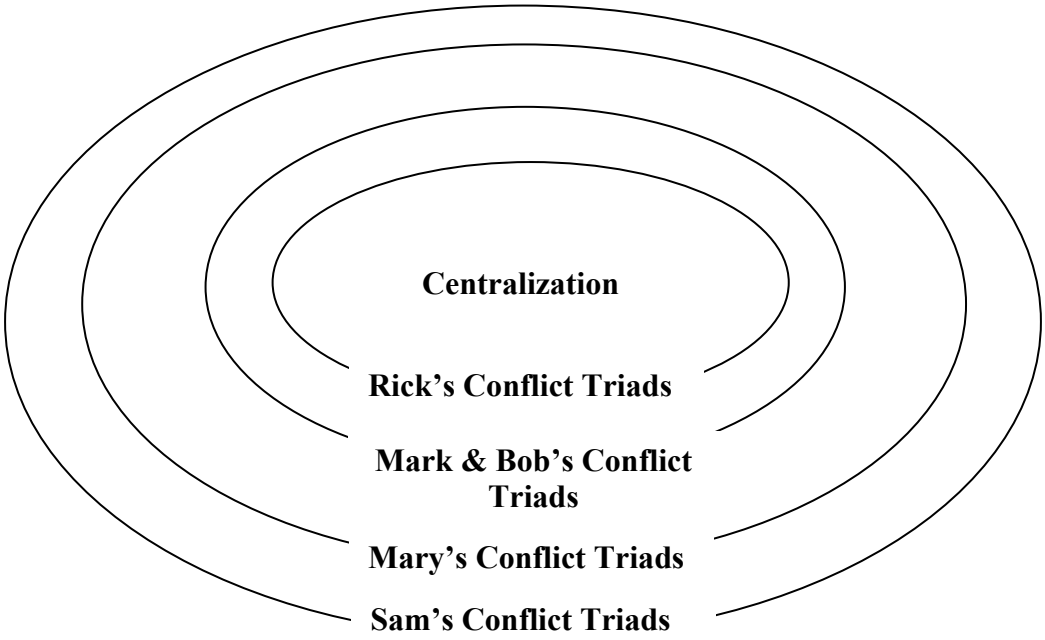

Figure 9. Pictorial representation of the potential for the centralization to spawn multiple different positioning triads for each interview participant.

Again, one action led to multiple reactions because individuals responded in different ways to the announcement. This depiction, to me, provides a better explanation for how such widely varied conflicts can still be connected to a single episode.

Contributions to expanding positioning theory.

Few prior studies in the organizational environment have explored the use of positioning theory. This study demonstrates the applicability of the theory to a very common context: an organization. Specifically, this study examines conflict resulting from a centralization and organizational restructuring. As a result, the study helps to bridge further the perceived gap between theory and practice by using positioning theory as a way to analyze conflict in an organizational environment.

Findings from the use of positioning theory can help the OD practitioners understand cultures during times of conflict. Harre, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, and Sabat (2009) talk about the need to better understand how cultures are exacerbated. What are cultures but a deeply engrained set of practices, habits, and beliefs for a given environment (Clampitt 2005; Schein, 1992)? Although this was not an initial goal of the research, it became apparent that positioning theory offers a way to identify and explain the texture of a strong culture in that the act of positioning points to people's assumptions about their rights and duties. Speech acts reveal what people are doing within the interaction, and storylines address the connectedness of the experience.

It became clear during the course of the study that participants linked their perception of a conflict to previous speech acts or positioning that might have occurred. Participants tended to make sense of their experience from the perspective of long-held storylines in the organization. This was evident in the case of Mark and Bob, who seemed to take a Site versus Corporate storyline. This storyline did not merely appear as a result of the centralization, but was apparent prior to the centralization, and was the metaphor Mark and Bob used to make sense of the

experience. The speech acts and positions were consistent with Mark and Bob's previous experiences of interacting within the Site versus Corporate storyline.

The centralization was corporate's decision. Neither Mark nor Bob were consulted prior to the centralization, and they did not play a large role in the announcement of the centralization. They were not positioned by corporate management as collaborators, a position with which they both seemed to be familiar. As Bob noted in his interview, corporate management often handled these types of administrative activities, while site management focused on the needs of the site. Mark also suggested that this lack of involvement led to certain inefficiencies in the centralization. Management did not consider differing time zones or how emergent work could or should be handled.

Mark and Bob interpreted these actions from the perspective that the centralization looked like, felt like, and sounded like the usual storyline of Site versus Corporate, so their actions were consistent with this storyline. For Bob, this meant standing back and letting corporate management handle things. For Mark, this meant cleaning up the mess corporate created because of their lack of understanding of the site's needs.

Rick, however, operated within a different storyline. He was a member of the centralization prior to the announcement because management asked him to help research how the centralization would work, and then acted upon his ideas. This generated different results. Rick mentioned that he no longer felt he should only concern himself with minor details, but felt like he was more of a peer of corporate management. In contrast to Bob and Mark, Rick was positioned as a peer because he was consulted prior to the centralization. Rick's perspective of the centralization was more positive than the perspective of Mark and Bob.

Sam also demonstrated that his perspective was based on something more than a recent understanding of interactions between employees and management. He took up a Supervisor versus Subordinate storyline because he felt that employees had long been victims of management. For him, the centralization was not localized to the announcement of the centralization. He connected the experience to a grievance he filed two years earlier. Sam made sense of the centralization from this earlier experience, and, I suspect, a number of experiences before that. As a result, he grew increasingly bitter about how he felt he was being treated by management. The current experience of the centralization only further reinforced the lived experience of the storyline. It is my contention that cultures exist and are reinforced within these perpetuated storylines, which fits squarely within the practice of organizational development. This will continue to be discussed in Future Implications.

Contributions to my practice in organizational development.

OD consultants are concerned with building a toolbox that will aid them with addressing organizational issues, and they strive to have a number of different tools within their toolbox when trying to identify ways of addressing potential issues (Clampitt, 2005). As a tool for analyzing conflict, positioning theory offered me as the OD consultant a thorough understanding of the complexities of the relationships of individuals engaged in conflict. This is important in terms of developing a rich, textured picture of what the conflict is about from the perspective of those engaged in the conflict, which is necessary so that I know what issues to address.

Senge (1990) discusses the necessity of understanding the system in order to identify the appropriate leverage to use when the system is broken. Senge's model focuses on interactions, processes, and organizational structure. This metaphor of the organization as a system serves as an example of why mechanistic views exist within the organization, but this potentially puts the

importance of understanding human interaction at risk. In order to effectively apply Senge's model, one must fully understand how the system works, which involves understanding the perspectives of those involved. In this research, this understanding was achieved via positioning theory.

This study's focus on positions, speech acts, and storylines not only helps to highlight potential causes of the conflict, but also reveals how the conflict is experienced by those who are engaged in it. The discussion of positions provides a better perspective of the rights and duties individuals felt they had, and what options they felt were available to them. Understanding what they perceived their rights and duties to be provides a better understanding of how and why individuals reacted a certain way in certain situations. The discussion of speech acts provides a better understanding of how individuals negotiated these rights and duties within the organization, and the storyline provides a better understanding of how they made sense of the experience. Using these techniques results, then, in a more textured analysis of the human experience during the conflict. Again, the discussion is elevated beyond simple cause and effect.

Conclusions

While I do believe positioning theory proved to be useful in analyzing this organization's conflict, and offered deeper insights from the perspective of the participants, an OD practitioner must consider which situations are most appropriate for a positioning theory analysis. The theory could be one of many tools in the OD consultant's toolbox. Positioning theory thoroughly represents a number of different perspectives, which leads to identifying a more satisfactory solution or way to manage the conflict; however, the OD consultant will need to determine whether this type of analysis is appropriate for a given situation.

The ability to address a conflict from the perspective of those who are engaged in it is most attractive in terms of improving the overall resolution, as well as improving the individual's perspective of the resolution. It was also exciting to see how these individuals were actively constructing their environments. Positioning theory will be an effective tool that I can rely on in the future to understand how cultures are created.

Implications for future research

Positioning theory proved to be an adequate means of describing human experience for this specific context, and also shed light on how the conflict experience was discursively constructed. The next step would be to see how this information could be used to help neutralize conflict that has a negative impact on the organization, as Harre and Slocum (2003) did with Georgetown University and the surrounding community. I am interested in seeing how intentionally fostering new storylines, positions, and speech acts might lead to a new way for management and employees to engage one another.

Another interesting research endeavor would be to consider how positioning theory can help to describe organizational cultures. As discussed previously, this potential became clearer as a result of this study's analysis. Since positioning theory helps to uncover individuals' perspectives, it may be an effective tool in understanding an organizational culture. According to Schein (1992), patterns of assumptions are the basis of all organizational culture. Schein says that "the essence of a culture lies in the pattern of basic underlying assumptions, and once one understands those, one can easily understand the other more surface levels and deal appropriately with them" (p. 26). Organizational culture is also similar to individual identity. Bisel and Barge (2010) argue that change messages also contain identity messages, and they use positioning theory to explore that idea. It would be interesting to explore culture development via positioning

theory at the organizational level. Understanding organizational culture is of primary interest to the OD consultant, and it can be of particular concern when the culture is extremely polarized (Clampitt, 2005).

In this study, strong storylines tended to reveal how polarized the culture really was. The emergence of a protagonist and antagonist also revealed polarized positioning. When participants reflected on their experiences while taking up strong storylines, they tended to position themselves in direct opposition to the *other,* as was the case with Sam. Sam's interview data seemed to contrast strongly with Mary's interview data, which most represented corporate management.

Even the way Mary and Sam talked about one of the characters was very polarized. Mary, Bob, and Sam all mentioned Jim during their interviews. Mary and Bob positioned Jim as a troublemaker, an employee who was known to cause problems for management; however, Sam positioned Jim as a hero in his interview, as someone who took up the causes of the acquisition agents. In a sense, Jim emerged as a *legend* during these interviews. Folktale literature describes a legend as someone who engages in heroic deeds (Bosma, 1992). The underlying implication is that someone needs to be rescued from something or someone else, which is why the storylines typically emerged during the Supervisor versus Subordinate storyline. Here, supervisors and subordinates were strongly positioned against one another. When told by Sam, Jim emerged as a hero to liberate the acquisition agents from management. Jim's opposition to management eventually led to his demise, which solidified his place as a legend within the organization. From management's perspective, however, Jim was a constant problem and annoyance. Management was responsive to Jim's questions and responded cautiously, which implies even management recognized his power.

The legends that emerge as different people position the same person from a polarized perspective indicate that a strong polarized culture exists. The individuals who become legendary tend to represent the essence of the polarized perspectives. For Sam, Jim was a hero because management was so counter to his perspective and the acquisition agents were so victimized by management that a hero was needed. Sam took up the Supervisor versus Subordinate storyline as a subordinate, even though he was also a member of management. For Mary and Bob, Jim was a troublemaker who filed frivolous grievances that wasted time and caused needless work. They took up the Supervisor versus Subordinate storyline at the other extreme, as the supervisors. When individuals feel the need to talk about a person in a polarizing way, it serves as an indication that a strong storyline exists. Again, the storylines appeared to perpetuate a polarized culture in this study. It would be interesting to see how the idea of legends can further be used to help explain strong organizational cultures.

In terms of using positioning theory as an analytical tool for the organizational development consultant, I am curious as to whether a more simplified model that still captures the richness of the experience can be developed. As an OD consultant, I find myself responding to multiple responsibilities and acting under constant pressure to act quickly within the organization, especially as tensions begin to escalate. Analyzing participants' perspectives for positions, speech acts, and storylines was no quick task. This may have been due to my own inexperience, but perhaps the techniques for conducting the analysis can be improved for their use in the organizational setting. There are still new avenues to be explored involving positioning theory in an organizational setting.

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Appendix A

Research Approval

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865.974.3466
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Date: July 21, 2011

To: Ghosten, Cynthia
Educational Psychology & Counseling

From: Brenda Lawson
Compliances

Subject: Annual Review and Progress Report:
Project Involving Research with Human Subjects

IRB #: 7981 B

IRB-APPROVED RENEWAL

Project: Analyzing Conflict: A Narrative Inquiry Approach

Initial Approval Date: 07/20/2009 Last IRB Approval Date: 07/21/2011

Approval Expires: 07/20/2012

In response to our request regarding annual review and a progress report of the above protocol, you indicated that the study is still active and that there have been no changes with regard to the use of human subjects in this project since the last date of review. Therefore, the Institutional Review Board has approved the protocol until **July, 2012**, which coincides with the anniversary month of your initial approval date.

If there should be any modifications in the project before the date of next annual review, please submit them, utilizing a Form D, to the Compliances Office immediately for review. Requests for your next annual review will be sent to you approximately one month prior to the expiration date.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Topic Domain: Work Responsibilities

Lead off question: Tell me about the work you do.

[*Covert Categories*: context, team dynamics, interactions, insight into their perspectives about their responsibilities versus the responsibilities of others, rights, duties.]

Possible Follow-up questions

1. What work is your team responsible for?
2. Who do you work with?
3. What's different about your work versus other teams within this work group?

Topic Domain: Critical Event

Lead off question: About nine months ago, your organization was restructured. Tell me about the reorganization.

[*Covert categories*: perspectives, assumptions, speech acts, storylines, positions, impact, significance]

Possible Follow-up questions

1. Tell me about an experience that stands out to you most during that period.
2. What role did you play in that experience?
3. What role did others play?
4. How has the experience changed you?
5. What about the experience is important to you?

Topic Domain: Disputes

Lead off question: Tell me about at time when your team experienced conflict.

[*Covert Categories*: speech acts, storylines and positions within conflicts, power, experiences negotiating conflicts, perspectives about causes of conflict]

Possible Follow-up questions

1. What did you do?
2. What did others do?
3. What could have been done differently?

Topic Domain: Conflict Resolution

Lead off question: Tell me about a time when a conflict was resolved.

[*Covert Categories*: speech acts, storyline, and positions in resolving conflict, power]

Possible Follow-up questions

1. What was done to resolve the conflict?
2. What did you do?
3. What did others do?
4. What was the outcome?

Vita

Cynthia Ghosten has been working in Organizational Development for twelve years. She completed a Bachelor of Arts in Communications in 1995 from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She completed the requirements for a Master's in Adult Education with a concentration in Organizational Development at the University of Tennessee Knoxville in 2003. Upon acceptance of this dissertation, she will graduate with a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology and Research from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2012.