DEDICATION

To my husband Patrick, my champion from the beginning of this journey, who did so much to support me through the dissertation process. We did this together. To my children, Kaleigh, Liam and Christopher who were excited about this endeavor and inquisitive about my research. To my parents who have always encouraged me to pursue my interests and supported me through the challenges. My mother’s encouraging texts at just the right moments kept me going. To my Swartz and Forst family members, friends, and colleagues at work for your encouragement, patience with my schedule, and checking in on me when the work was heavy.
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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES THAT ENCOURAGE DISSENT AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON ORGANIZATIONAL DECISIONS

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Caroline Watts

This study explored the practices organizations employ to solicit and consider dissent, and the influence of these practices on organizational decision making. Although there is agreement in the literature that soliciting and considering dissent can lead to better decisions, there are significant gaps in the literature. The value of dissent has been studied for many years and specific recommendations have been made to encourage opposing views and seek alternatives when making organizational decisions. However, not many studies have addressed whether organizations are using these recommended practices or other models to encourage dissent.

A qualitative study using individual interviews was conducted to obtain an in-depth understanding of practices used in organizations. Thirty leaders across 19 organizations were interviewed individually to obtain the specifics of practices that influence dissent expression. Participant perceptions indicated that organizational history, culture and leadership are significant influencers in whether employees will dissent in an organization, but practices are necessary to bring about dissent. The data in this study also indicated that power and consequences are barriers to effective dissent and can be mitigated through dissent encouraging practices.

This research provides strong support for the literature and extends the literature by identifying methods and practices used by organizations that encourage dissent.
Specific accounts from leaders in organizations show that dissent can a) lead to innovation; b) lead to avoidance of mistakes; and c) lead to mistakes when it is absent or not considered. Prior studies have addressed the value of dissent, but few qualitative studies provide examples of organizational decisions resulting from dissent. Additional findings from this study highlight 1) the importance of one-on-one and small group communication in soliciting dissenting views; 2) decision-making methods that provide an avenue to evoke and consider dissent; and 3) the emphasis on consideration of stakeholder views versus the devil’s advocate in decision making. Finally, practices that solicit dissent can be valuable even when dissent is not heeded, as they can lead to a quick reversal of a decision when necessary.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Every day, important organizational mistakes are made by people in all sectors. At times, a decision or oversight is incomprehensible and leads to many questions: What transpired? Did the leader have a team that was part of the decision-making process, and did anyone oppose that decision? If so, why were they not heard? Whether it is a pharmaceutical drug going to market prematurely, a corporate ethics scandal, or a General directing his troops into battle, certain organizational decisions are so vital that they profoundly impact many people and at times even mean life or death. Groupthink is one phenomenon often mentioned as an explanation for poor organizational decisions. Janis (1972), one of the early writers about groupthink, describes groupthink as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive group, when the members striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise other alternative courses of action…” (p. 9). One way to lessen the influence of groupthink is to have someone play the role of devil’s advocate and to assign this role to different people at different times (Janis, 1972). Nemeth, Brown, and Rogers (2001) expanded on this notion and learned that individuals who authentically believe a dissenting view are more effective than those who play the role of devil’s advocate. Other researchers have also espoused the need for organizations to solicit and consider opposing views, but are organizations listening to these views?

The idea of dissent is becoming popular. In the last decade, dissent-related topics started to appear in the popular organizational literature. There are titles related to surrounding yourself with people who think differently. *Harvard Business Review* ran an
online article just last year titled: “True leaders believe dissent is an obligation” (Taylor, 2017). The article references McKinsey & Co., the highly regarded global management consulting company, and the value the organization places on dissent. At McKinsey, even the most junior employee is encouraged to disagree with the most senior person in the room.

Although information on dissent is beginning to appear in the popular business literature, there is a dearth of academic literature on this topic. Academic studies suggest that the lack of dissent expression and consideration can lead to poor outcomes (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1972; Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Nutt, 1999; Roberto, 2013). Additional literature focuses on the leader’s role with regard to dissent. Leader behaviors in terms of openness to dissent, encouragement of dissenting views, and reactions to dissent can also play an important role in whether dissent is expressed (Lublin, 2014; Shaw, 2014; Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Heath & Heath, 2013).

Specific industries have dire consequences when dissent is not heard. In the airline and medical industries, for example, ignoring dissent can and has led to fatalities (Baron, 2010; Pian-Smith et al., 2009). This knowledge has prompted research on employee voice and training for employees on the importance of speaking up to authority. Employees are trained in how to speak up and what to do when their suggestions are not listened to the first time.

From my own experience, I hear exasperated executives wonder why no one spoke up about potential problems in a proposed plan before implementation. I’ve seen large system initiatives rolled out for training before they were ready, necessitating major
changes and retraining. After the fact, people often say that they knew about or expressed disagreement with the plan early in the process. Were they not heard? Did the project leader draw out and consider objections? Or did the culture not encourage such input?

It is evident from the communication literature that conflict can be productive in organizations and that conflict can be healthy or unhealthy (Simon & Agazarian, 2000; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999; Grenny, McMillan, Patterson, & Switzler, 2002). Group dynamics have been studied for many years, and organizations have taught leaders how to brainstorm, ask for input, and facilitate meaningful discussions. Many organizations are now spending a lot of money on employee training in the areas of feedback and difficult conversations. Partners in Leadership, for example, offers a popular accountability seminar containing a segment on feedback in which participants learn how to seek and provide feedback regularly. A key competitor of Partners in Leadership, Vitalsmarts, offers a two day seminar on crucial conversations based on the popular book *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high* (Grenny et al., 2002). Another popular book, based on extensive research from the Harvard Negotiation Project, is Stone et al.’s (1999) *Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. Therefore, organizations are beginning to address certain aspects of dissent in practice even if they do not have a broader strategy to solicit and evaluate dissent.

Organizations such as McKinsey are known for encouragement of opposing views. Bridgewater Associates, an investment company based in Connecticut, is another organization known for requiring employees to express dissent. They have been studied
repeatedly, and although they encourage dissent, they have transparency practices that some consider extreme. A *New York Times* article reported on employee complaints about surveillance, videotaped meetings, and recordings shared with other employees without employee consent (Stevenson and Goldstein, 2016). Although there are reports about a few companies that encourage dissent, the extent to which their employees actually dissent is unclear.

Despite the plethora of information pointing to specific suggestions for encouraging and evaluating dissent (Nutt, 1999; Roberto, 2013; Shaw, 2014; Schoemaker, Krupp, & Howland, 2013), many in organizations today still sit in meetings in which colleagues are afraid to voice dissent. How widespread is the knowledge that better decisions are made when dissent is encouraged? Are many organizations actually putting practices into place to encourage dissent, and what do those practices look like? Perhaps the philosophy of dissent expression is catching on in some environments without clear methods to ensure that dissent is shared.

Although progress has been made in understanding that dissent can be valuable, additional research on this topic is necessary because it may contribute to organizational innovation and prevention of mistakes. These mistakes can be detrimental to the health of an organization, as in cases in which the company fails to innovate and loses competitive edge. Currently, many of the large retail companies are struggling to survive because of online competition. Furthermore, these mistakes can be fatal, as is seen when co-pilots and nurses fail to speak up in the course of key decisions by captains and doctors.

There is information on the topic of dissent, but there are limited academic
studies, and those that exist are in different fields of study and literature. Because of the
importance of this topic, all of the relevant information should be synthesized to
understand larger strategies necessary for encouragement and consideration. Significant
progress can be made through analyses of practices that work to encourage organizational
dissent. More extensive research is necessary in the area of successful organizational
practices. More knowledge in this area can contribute to the development of a best
practice model for implementation in organizations.

**Research Questions and Assumptions**

The specific focus of this research is to answer the questions:

1) What practices or models do organizations employ to solicit and consider
dissent in organizational decision making?

2) How do practices that encourage dissent influence organizational decision
making?

The assumption behind the first research question is that some organizations have a
defined method to encourage dissent as part of an overall decision-making process. This
may include assigning someone the role of finding problems to a proposed course of
action. It is also assumed that few organizations have formal processes to encourage
dissent even though the literature suggests that dissent should be encouraged and is
valuable to organizations. With regard to how dissent influences decision making, the
literature indicates that dissent produces better decisions (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1972;
Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Nutt, 1999; Roberto, 2013). Therefore, the current study hopes
to reveal ways in which decisions are influenced by dissent (See Figure 1).
My interest in studying this topic comes from two perspectives. When I was a leader of a human resource function earlier in my career, I was interested in seeking out the opinions of direct reports. I knew that this is a good leadership practice, and I wanted to model this for other leaders in the organization. I learned that seeking input often meant hearing dissenting views. I experienced firsthand the rewards and difficulty of doing this. One of my direct reports, who was the most difficult to manage, often had the most creative and forward thinking ideas. In fact, this employee suggested early in my career that I could benefit the organization by being part of the executive team. This was not something I was thinking about at that point in my career, but mentioned my potential contribution to the CEO, who thought it was a great idea. As the youngest member and
only female member on the team, I experimented with how to express my own dissent. I saw the value of processes in which multiple alternatives were considered at a time when many decisions in the organization were made after considering only one alternative. The leader of the organization had excellent intuition that often led to a good decision without a process. This would not be sustainable, however, in a rapid growth environment.

The second way in which my interest in this topic developed was from my experience in working with various companies in a consulting role. I noticed that particularly in hierarchical organizations, employees and leaders were often uncomfortable sharing their thoughts on a course of action. This appeared to be based more on organizational practices, culture, and leadership style and less on the knowledge and skills of the individual holding the view. I observed that when people did not speak up about anticipated problems, the problems often materialized when they could have been prevented. My bias is toward the value of voicing dissent, and this will be an important factor to manage in this study. In my communications with participants, it will be important for me to share the topic of the study but not provide cues about my assumptions. Additionally, it will be important to avoid leading questions during interviews.

**Conclusion**

Researchers have made strides in the study of dissent. The research in one field, however, is often not connected with other literature. Kassing (2002) and Garner (2009, 2012), for example, have done extensive research on individual dissent behaviors, but
they do not seem to build on or connect with the aviation or medical voice literature. Likewise, the communication literature does not seem to connect with the decision-making literature with regard to dissent. Although Roberto (2013) and Nutt (1999) report on qualitative research and bring to light the importance of dissent in decision making, there is little qualitative research focused on the area of dissent encouragement, expression, and evaluation. Organizational practices related to communication, conflict, and decision making have been suggested, but no attempts have been made to synthesize these suggestions into a cohesive model that can be tested. Finally, there is little information on the prevalence of organizational practices that encourage dissent, what they entail, and whether organizations primarily pay lip service to this idea or have clear practices behind the desire to encourage and evaluate dissent. The current study aims to rectify this by identifying and exploring these practices.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores more deeply the literature related to dissent to provide an understanding of the existing literature and the gaps in the literature. The literature on conformity and groupthink are reviewed first and serve as important background information for understanding dissent. Next, existing studies on dissent are discussed. This chapter then goes on to overview the leadership literature. Leadership studies contribute to an understanding of the value and challenge of obtaining organizational dissent. Finally, effective dissenter behaviors found in the communication literature are overviewed. When the aforementioned bodies of literature are reviewed and connected, the need for the current study becomes clear.

Groupthink and Conformity

To understand why important information is sometimes ignored or not considered in the organizational decision-making process, an exploration of the groupthink and conformity literature will provide background for this study. Prior to Janis’s (1972) landmark work on groupthink, Asch (1955) conducted a well-known study in which an experimenter asked groups of seven to nine male college research participants who were together in one room to compare the lengths of lines. They were first shown a white card with a black vertical line printed on the card. They were then shown a second white card and were asked to choose which line from among three black vertical lines on the second card matched the length of the line on the first card. The correct answer was the line of the same exact length as the original line, whereas the other options were clearly much shorter lines. Despite the obvious answer, Asch found that over 30% of participants
reported an incorrect answer when the majority of the participants, who were actors, reported an incorrect answer first. There were some mitigating factors in that the percentage of incorrect answers went down when at least one other person responded in a way counter to the majority (Asch, 1955). This study is interesting in that the participants were part of an experimental study and therefore were not likely to be cohesive from working together for a period of time.

Asch’s experiments showed that if anyone in the room dissented, the research participants were more likely to stand up to social pressure and make the correct choice regarding the lines. This occurred when the dissenter was wrong as well as when the dissenter was correct, indicating that any disagreement can create an environment to think independently (Harford, 2010). From this research, it appears that dissent may play an important role in lessening the influence of conformity in decision making.

One theory that may explain Asch’s results is optimal distinctiveness theory. Brewer (1991) holds that there are two fundamental and competing needs of humans. One is the need for inclusion, and the other is the need for differentiation. This creates a tension between an individual’s need for validation and similarity to others and a need for uniqueness and individuation (Brewer, 2001). These needs play out in groups. “Individuals will resist being identified with social categorizations that are either too inclusive or too differentiating but will define themselves in terms of social identities that are optimally distinctive” (Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010, p. 68). In Asch’s experiment, perhaps being the only one in the group with a different opinion presented
discomfort due to inclusion needs. For some, knowing that even one other person agreed with one’s view may have contributed to an ability to express differentiation.

Schwenk (1997) has yet another view specifically related to conformity in organizations. He believes that there is so much emphasis on having a clear organizational vision that employees feel compelled to articulate the leader’s vision instead of their own views. He holds that “people within organizations must feel free to disagree not only with the means for realizing the leader’s vision and for achieving his or her goals, but with the vision, goals and core ideologies themselves” (Schwenk, 1997, p. 5). As one prescription for environments in which people may not feel free to disagree, Schwenk suggests a devil’s advocate to question assumptions and generate useful conflicts in decision making. There are many important historical examples in which groupthink is said to have had an influence on critical decisions. The Bay of Pigs crisis, for example, may have been prevented if Kennedy’s advisors were not a cohesive group reluctant to question one another (Janis, 1972). Information was readily available that the mission would not be successful, but much of the information was overlooked or dismissed. Although Kennedy’s advisors were considered extremely knowledgeable and competent as individuals, as a group, they neglected to surface helpful dissent, increasing the chances of the negative outcome that in fact materialized (Janis, 1972).

The space shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986 is another example of a poor decision that may have resulted from groupthink. After the disaster, reports surfaced that engineers had concerns about the Challenger, but they were not heard or were dismissed in favor of proceeding with the planned mission. Today, we continue to see examples of
poor decisions in which important information did not surface or was overlooked. The BP oil spill crisis and Volkswagen’s unethical emissions decisions are among those in more recent history. There were practices at these companies that existed for some time, but dissent was not heeded. We also hear about companies such as Kodak (Lucas & Goh, 2009) that ignored disruptors in the industry and continued to focus their market on film instead of exploring newer competitive technology. Were these corporations victims of groupthink?

Although the theory of groupthink has contributed to an understanding of group dynamics, some report shortcomings with groupthink, in particular the idea that poor decisions are specifically connected to the personal attractiveness aspect of group cohesion (McCauley, 1998). Others have studied the proponents and challengers of groupthink and have concluded that despite the variety of perspectives and the need for empirical support, the aspects of groupthink that contribute to our understanding of decision making and ways to prevent problems associated with decision making still have broad application (Rose, 2011). Neck and Moorhead (1995) commented about the surprising lack of research in the area of groupthink; they link this to the resulting slow progress in determining causes and solutions. They mention that the topic is popular but that there is little research to assist with learning and application of those learnings. Because groupthink researchers often mention the importance of the devil’s advocate or a dissenting view, a more in-depth review of the literature on dissent will be helpful in determining if dissent effectively combats conformity and results in better decisions.
closer look at dissent may also shed light on the complexities of groupthink and on why it
appears to be such a challenge for organizations.

The Value of Dissent

Various terms related to dissent are used in the literature, and dissent is not always studied within the context of groupthink. In addition to dissent, terms such as voice, opposing view, and speaking up are used to describe a similar construct. Devil’s advocate is also commonly used to discuss dissent in the form of one playing a role of dissenter; this construct does not tend to represent authentic or naturally occurring dissent (Nemeth et al., 2001). For the purposes of this study, dissent is defined as an alternative viewpoint to a proposed decision or course of action, and a dissenter is a person who presents the alternative view. To study organizational practices that encourage or discourage dissent, it is first important to understand the culture necessary to promote an atmosphere where dissent is possible. When dissent occurs in a group, team members need to believe that the group will not think poorly of them or punish them for challenging the majority opinion (Ward, Lankau, Amason, Sonnenfeld, & Agle, 2007, p. 89). Gandossy and Sonnenfeld (2005) promote fostering a culture of open dissent. They differentiate dissent from disloyalty and hold that the CEO can set a tone to encourage internal feedback to identify and correct problems, thus preventing disasters. Moreover, the CEO is the one responsible to provide the environment for and encourage candid discussions. It is important for top leaders to surround themselves with a group of good critics (Ward et al., 2007). The research suggests, then, that both the leader and the team members play a role in creating a culture open to dissent.
Esquivel and Kleiner (1996) go a step further and hold that conflict, in the form of a devil’s advocate, can enhance the quality of decisions made by a group. They believe this point is evidenced in an important study by Boulding. In this study, managers were assigned to groups to generate solutions to complex problems. In half of the groups, a devil’s advocate actor was assigned to challenge the group’s decisions. At the end of the first task, the groups with the devil’s advocates performed significantly better in that they generated more and better solutions to the problems. The most surprising finding of this study was that after the first problem solving period, the groups were told that they could eliminate one member. All of the groups with the devil’s advocates eliminated the actor even though they were much more successful than the groups without the devil’s advocates.

The results of the Boulding study point out just how difficult it can be to obtain opposing views. Even though the groups with the devil’s advocates performed significantly better on the tasks, the discomfort in discussing opposing information superseded the performance results so that the groups wanted to eliminate the devil’s advocate. Situations employees prefer do not necessarily result in the best course of action for the organization or team. “In addition to being an effective role model, the new strategic leader needs at least one good alter ego, devil’s advocate, or contrarian to avoid getting into a rut” (Reimann, 1994). Reimann holds that it is not necessarily a good idea for CEOs to create opposition themselves, but it is important for them to seek out and tolerate dissenting views.

Furthermore, when looking at the differences between the devil’s advocate and
authentic dissent, Nemeth et al. (2001) found that authentic dissent, when an individual presents his or her own viewpoint, is superior to an individual playing the role of devil’s advocate. This holds true whether participants are aware that the role is being played and whether the role being played is consistent with the devil’s advocate’s actual views. Groups with authentic dissent produced a greater quantity and quality of solutions (Nemeth et al., 2001). Therefore, although a devil’s advocate can increase creativity and the generation of alternatives, authentic dissent may be the most desirable opposition for organizational decision making. Nemeth et al. (2001) hold that one reason for the difference is due to the individual’s commitment to the view based on the willingness to take a risk to present the opposing view.

Some organizations understand the value of dissent and intentionally seek opposing views. For example, in the late 1980s and 1990s, Harley Davidson used the term “creative friction” to encourage debate and ensure that the best product decisions were made (Ward et al., 2007). This involved getting ideas from cross-functional teams at all levels with conflicting viewpoints. The process was used from product development through product launch so that the best decisions were made.

**Leaders and Dissent**

Now that organizations are catching on to the idea that dissent can positively influence decisions, a growing body of literature is focusing on the importance of opposing views in effective leadership. Lublin (2014) provided specific examples of how avoiding conflict might cost the leader her job. One example mentioned a marketing manager who was driven to launch products quickly but neglected to listen to the views
of those around her. Only after coaching was she able to seek out employee ideas and create healthy conflict. Lublin gave another example of Southwest Airlines and their training program for high potential managers, in which the managers learn to interrupt harmony and encourage internal debates. Furthermore, Lublin (2014) identified “challenge” as one of six essential leadership skills and described what this skill entails:

Strategic thinkers question the status quo. They challenge their own and others’ assumptions and encourage divergent points of view. Only after careful reflections and examination of a problem through many lenses do they take to decisive action. This requires patience, courage and an open mind. (p. 3)

One can imagine that this leadership skill of challenge is a delicate balance with the time pressures often found in organizational environments. Careful reflection and the consideration of alternative courses of action take time, and effective leaders need to withstand the pressures that may come with making important decisions. In fact, leaders may find themselves in situations where they oppose other leaders who are interested in moving quickly instead of considering important alternative viewpoints on a course of action.

In addition to establishing the importance of many viewpoints, Schoemaker et al. (2013) specify ways for a leader to improve the ability to challenge. Their suggestions can be summarized into the following prescribed measures:

- Focus on the root causes of a problem instead of the symptoms
- List long-standing assumptions about an aspect of business and ask a diverse group if they hold true
- Encourage debate by holding safe zone meetings when dialogue and conflict are expected and welcomed
• Create a rotating position for the purpose of questioning the status quo, include naysayers in a decision process to surface challenges early

• Capture input from people not directly affected by a decision who may have a good perspective on repercussions.

Likewise, Shaw (2014) discusses the importance of the leader seeking out disconfirming data. Leaders tend to gather data that confirm their belief systems, but it is necessary for leaders to seek data that contradict current beliefs to overcome important leadership blind spots. Shaw also suggests specific leadership techniques to promote “productive fights” among team members. One technique involves establishing a norm that silence on important issues is unacceptable so that debate is encouraged. Another technique is to disallow team members from being critical or tough on each other personally. Shaw also believes that those making recommendations to the senior team should include at least two or three options and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each option. In addition, the leader can refrain from offering an opinion so that the team doesn’t take cues from the leader and attempt to support the leader’s view. Because team members whose position is not supported can become discouraged and not be interested in supporting the final decision, it is very important to ensure that team members can successfully work together after the decision-making process (Shaw, 2014).

Shaw’s recommendations for leaders to overcome their blind spots appear to be consistent with those espoused by other researchers (Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Ward et al., 2007, Schoemaker et al., 2013; Lublin, 2014). However, the difficulty in implementing these recommendations is referenced by many of the same researchers.
The challenge of breaking long-standing habits, especially in hierarchical organizations, can be formidable. In cultures where employees defer to higher-ups to make decisions and leaders are overly confident about their opinions, creating an environment for dissent requires a great deal of groundwork. There are numerous examples of poor decisions coming from overly confident leaders who have a history of success. The story of Ron Johnson (Shaw, 2014) provides an example of a previously successful leader who did not listen to opposing views. Johnson was hired by JCPenney after an exceptional performance as CEO of Target and then Apple, where he led the retail division to be one of the most profitable globally. After joining JCPenney, he moved quickly to create a new vision and changed the strategy from its history of selling significantly discounted and private-label goods to offering a range of branded products. He proceeded with confidence, without pilot tests, despite opposition saying he was moving too quickly. In the end, the vision and execution of the vision was not successful as demonstrated by a significant decrease in sales (Shaw, 2014).

The challenges associated with obtaining opposing views have been discussed in the literature. Research substantiates that openness and cooperativeness are two important traits a leader needs to possess to handle conflict effectively, but the difficulty is in finding strategies to create a climate of openness and cooperation (Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996). This is challenging because the leader is also following a stated agenda. These challenges lead to the question: Are there examples of specific leaders who seek and listen to opposing views? Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, is an example of a leader who found it necessary to separate his observations of process from facilitation of
the agenda. He assigned an individual to lead the team and follow the agenda during company meetings. This allowed him to focus on process aspects of the meeting and observe whether people understood what the organization was trying to do and whether people agreed with proposed plans. He also assessed the participants’ commitment toward the goal and whether dissent was shared. He was interested in inviting dissent so that it could be openly discussed. Sam Walton got involved in the meetings, asked questions, validated acceptance of what was said, and challenged team members to become the devil's advocate. As Sam Walton found, to focus on process, the leader must observe the verbal and non-verbal cues from the team, which is difficult when the leader is running the meeting and following an agenda (Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996). Most of the literature does not provide evidence of a leader’s ability to focus on process, as in the Sam Walton example, but instead mentions the importance of a leadership style of openness to foster an environment in which opposition can be heard.

The literature from early discussions of groupthink and dissent up to the present clearly establish the importance of opposing views in effective leadership and decision making. The research also indicates the risks associated with not listening to opposing views, as was the case in the Ron Johnson example. Although the research makes a case for the significance of taking opposing views into account when making decisions, Heath and Heath (2013) report that many leaders still do not seek dissenting views and thus suffer the resulting consequences. One of the studies they discuss is Paul Nutt’s research on how business leaders make decisions in everyday life. In a 1999 study, Nutt analyzed 168 decisions and found that only 29% of the teams he studied considered more than one
alternative. When only one alternative was considered, decisions failed 52% of the time over the long term versus only 32% of the decisions with two or more alternatives (Nutt, 1999). Therefore, the practice of seeking opposing views may still be in its infancy even though the value of the practice is clear in the literature.

**Leaders and Paradoxes**

Closely related to the idea of opposing views or dissent is the concept of paradoxes. Roger Martin (2007) interviewed 50 leaders with excellent records and found that:

> they have the predisposition and the capacity to hold in their heads two opposing ideas at once. And then, without panicking or simply settling for one alternative or the other, they’re able to creatively resolve the tension between those two ideas by generating a new one that contains elements of the others but is superior to both… (p. 2).

Roger believes that this type of integrative thinking is used infrequently because the complexity makes people anxious, and people tend to avoid ambiguity and move toward clarity. There is a feeling of closure when a decision has been made. An individual often take sides when a decision has to be made, and sees one side as right and the other as wrong. The individual may try to prove that one side is the better choice. Successful leaders, on the other hand, are often quoted as saying that the decision is not an “either-or” (Martin, 2007). Similarly, Jacobson (2012) contends that by understanding paradox, individuals and functional groups who hold opposing views are more likely to both advocate their own perspective and see the potential value of the other’s perspective. Like Martin (2007), Jacobson (2012) mentions balancing the paradox to enable the creation of a new and better possibility. This becomes possible if people do not fall into the trap that only one side can prevail to the exclusion of another point of view. Jacobson
also mentions that people believe that one side can prevail to help ameliorate their anxieties. Holding various viewpoints requires managing this tension, which many people are not willing or able to do.

Smith and Lewis (2012) extend the research and talk about managing paradoxes globally. They say, “global leaders find themselves faced with tensions between global, communal strategies and local, individualistic market needs. Framed as an either/or choice, leaders may experience ambivalence and feel stuck” (p. 228). They propose that the way to manage this is through openness on the part of the leader as opposed to avoiding the paradox. Similarly, Covey (2012) mentions that often only two alternatives are discussed, and the discussion becomes about the compromise between two alternatives. A third, creative alternative might provide the best solution, but the group doesn’t get there if they are trying to compromise between two alternatives. Creativity comes into play when people suspend their positions because the conflict diminishes, which allows for the development of more alternatives. There seems to be a consensus in the literature that managing paradox is critical to effective leadership. Having this skill allows effective leaders to seek out and hear opposing views.

**Conflict**

Some of the research distinguishes between good opposition and unhealthy opposition. This is also, at times, stated as good and bad conflict. A background on types of opposition may lead to a broader understanding of how organizations can encourage healthy dissent.
Esquivel and Kleiner (1996) identify two types of conflict: C-type and A-type. C-type conflict involves disagreement on issues while maintaining a level of respect; it does not negatively interfere with the health of relationships. This type of conflict promotes communication and team effectiveness. A-type conflict, on the other hand, may involve unhealthy put downs, turf wars, anger, and distrust. Esquivel and Kleiner (1996) also emphasize that leader behaviors need to strike a delicate balance between not suppressing conflict and ensuring that conflict is C-type and will not descend into A-type. In this way, the leader will support an environment that is open to positive, constructive debate. In summary, the right type of conflict makes a difference; constructive debate can be a byproduct of task conflict, but decision making can be negatively influenced by relationship conflict (Ward et al., 2007).

In going beyond good and bad conflict, some of the literature points to situations in which one negative team member is the primary reason for group dysfunction. Felps, Mitchell, and Byington (2006) posit that negative interpersonal behaviors of one team member can be predictive of overall team performance. The healthier members of the team may disengage or leave the group, and this can decrease the likelihood of team success. Although toxic team members can have detrimental effects on a group, it is important to distinguish between an oppositional team member and one who is comfortable presenting opposing views. One can significantly contribute to team success, whereas the opposite can occur with the negative team member.

Finally, it is important to analyze conflict in relation to the stages of group development to understand dissent occurring in a group. Groups pass through predictable
phases of development that were first coined by Tuckman: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Weiss, Tilin, & Morgan, 2013). Early stages of group development involve a focus on issues associated with dependency, counterdependency, and trust. Later stages allow the group to focus on work. Groups progress through stages by achieving process-oriented goals such as member safety, expressing dissent, and creating methods for making decisions. Although conflict is present in every stage of development, the type of conflict and how it is managed differs from stage to stage. “The key challenge for group members and leaders is finding the balance between tasks and social-emotional issues and managing the conflict that these issues engender over the life span of the group” (p. 816). In the first stage of development, when members are concerned with inclusion, the likelihood of groupthink is high while there is little conflict. The second stage, however, is marked by conflict, and it is in this stage that effective handling of dissent can allow the group to progress to the environment of trust present in the third stage of development. The fourth stage of development is characterized by group productivity and effectiveness. Because conflict and other issues can be effectively resolved in this stage, the group can focus on attaining goals. Although conflict is still present in stage four, the group is strong enough to encourage and work through these healthier, task-related conflicts. The importance of managing dissent well is evident in moving a group from early stages to the fourth stage, the most productive stage of development.
Effective Dissenter Behaviors

Research suggests that groups and leaders have influence over the tone and environment necessary to encourage and enable dissent. Although dissent may occur in established work groups, it also occurs in a variety of other forms, such as in groups that meet only once and in dyads such as coworkers or an employee and manager. After looking at the various factors related to dissent, it is valuable to delve into effective dissenter behaviors. This will allow for a better understanding of organizational practices that support effective dissent. Kassing (2002) was one of the first to look at upward dissent behaviors in organizations in relation to how employees share opposition with their supervisors. He found that employees use five main strategies: direct factual appeal, which involves supporting dissent with physical evidence, organizational knowledge, or examples from other work experience; repetition, or continuing to present dissent at multiple points on the same topic over time; solution presentation along with dissent; circumvention, or dissenting to those above the immediate supervisor when immediate supervisors are not responsive; and threatening resignation as leverage to obtain responsiveness.

This research is quite eye opening because most employees would recognize these strategies, but many would define them as risky. An employee might avoid repetition for fear of being viewed as a pest. An even riskier proposition might be circumvention, in that an employee risks the relationship with the supervisor by circumventing it to discuss the issue with a higher-up. This might be acceptable as a “skip-level meeting” in some organizations, but in many, it is considered inappropriate behavior. Finally, threatening
resignation may be the riskiest of the strategies in that the employee may be seen as no longer committed to the organization after threatening to exit the organization if an opposing view is not heeded. Researchers have alluded to the difficulty involved in dissent, but Kassing’s (2002) study illustrates the reality of risky dissent strategies used by employees in organizations. On the other hand, if organizations can create cultures in which employees freely express ideas to all levels, productive dissent can become the norm.

Garner (2009) expanded on the literature and Kassing’s (2002) findings by looking at 11 types of dissent messages. He found that, in addition to direct factual appeal and solution presentation, messages involving coalitions (getting assistance from the audience or recruiting others who feel the same way) and inspiration (appealing to values or morals) were frequently used to express dissent, whereas messages containing pressure or offering to do something in exchange were less frequently used. Although these studies shed light on specific strategies and frequency of use by dissenters, they do not address the effectiveness or outcomes of dissent. Conclusions about which strategies produce the results the dissenter wants are not possible from this research.

A subsequent study addressed which types of messages dissenters perceived were more effective and appropriate (Garner, 2012). Results indicated that dissenters perceived solution presentation, circumvention, and repetition as effective, but they did not find coalition building messages to be effective. Building coalitions by seeking allies may create long-term effectiveness, according to the study results, but they may not show up in perceptions of short-term success. With regard to appropriateness, solution
presentation and direct factual appeals were perceived as appropriate, and pressure tactics and humor were perceived as inappropriate (Garner, 2012). This idea of appropriateness and employees’ perception of such behaviors may be a critical link between an employee’s willingness to dissent and the ways in which they are willing to dissent. Employees, at times, choose to leave an organization instead of taking the risk of presenting opposition. Although the importance of dissent is clear in the literature, the research on dissent behaviors is in the early stages. Most studies on organizational dissent behaviors tend to focus on self-report methods for gathering data, and there are limitations to this type of data. Individuals are basing accounts on memory and their perceptions of their own behavior. Therefore, studies using alternative measures of dissent behavior to assess its influence on outcomes would contribute to the literature.

Although there is a gap in the literature on effective dissent behaviors in organizations and organizational practices to support those behaviors, the fields of medicine and aviation have started to look at communication and the disastrous implications of ignoring dissent in those fields. Baron (2010) summarizes NASA data suggesting that 70% to 80% of aviation accidents are due to poor communication. When referring to subordination problems in particular, he holds that

The First Officer (F/O) must be able to act as both an assertive individual and as a subordinate in a team atmosphere. The basic dichotomy establishes the premise of a very fine balance that must be constantly maintained for proper communication to occur. Speaking up to a superior can be difficult for some people. However, not speaking up can have tragic results…(Baron, 2010, p. 3)

Baron (2010) highlights a transcript from the 1982 Air Florida crash in which the First Officer mentions something wrong with the engine instruments six times and is ignored by the Captain. “Typically, if something does not look right by the pilot not
flying (in this case the F/O), an ‘abort’ callout should be made and the pilot flying (in this
case the Captain) should unquestionably abort the takeoff as per the takeoff briefing” (p. 3). This is where risk comes into play yet again. An abort callout may seem extremely risky to the First Officer, and it may be difficult to decide when circumstances are so important that it is required. There is an unequal power relationship in the cockpit, and this also comes into play. Certain cultures defer more to power and are less likely to speak up. Individuals from countries such as Morocco, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Brazil are accepting of unequally distributed power, whereas individuals from Ireland, Denmark, Norway, and the United States are much less likely to accept unequally distributed power and are more likely to speak up to superiors (Baron, 2010). Therefore, the aviation industry looks at not only effective communication necessary for specific dissent to be heard, but it also looks at the crew pairing process to understand the impact of cultural differences on communication and dissent.

The medical field has found similar problems with communication. One study uses information learned from the aviation field to teach residents specific verbiage for speaking up because it can be difficult to speak up or challenge one’s superior (Pian-Smith et al., 2009). Training residents to challenge an attending faculty surgeon in a simulation using a two-step process resulted in improvement in the frequency and quality of challenges to physicians by residents. More specifically, the following model of language was used in the study when suggestions were not acted on by a superior:

The two challenge approach was implemented via twice pairing an advocacy-inquiry and then taking some action. For instance, “I see that you plan to administer a spinal anesthetic to this patient. She has a platelet count of 80,000. I learned that we shouldn’t do a spinal unless the count was at least 100,000. Can
you clarify your view?” If no answer or a nonsensical answer is received from the attending faculty anesthesiologist, the trainee might say, “I see that you plan to administer a spinal anesthetic, but I worry her platelets are too low. I think it’s unsafe and we should do a general anesthetic. What do you think?” Again, if no answer or a nonsensical answer is forthcoming, the trainee is taught to get additional help to protect the patient and resolve the disagreement. (Pian-Smith et al., p. 85)

This two-challenge research indicates that effective dissent behaviors can be taught, and it provides a specific model of verbal dissent that has been lacking in the literature. This model has promise for potential application to all organizations regardless of industry. Because the model is relevant in critical and time-pressured situations, it may be transferrable to other situations with some adjustments to the language. For example, when an organization’s profits rapidly decline and the organization is making decisions about whether to lay off employees, a similar model in which they first consider other alternatives may contribute to the frequency of effective dissent.

In addition to what has been borrowed from the aviation and medical literature on dissent, the communication literature provides insights into effective behaviors in situations when an opposing view is presented. Although this literature is focused on many types of communication and not just dissent, it does address challenging communication, including dissent, and it is applicable to dissent in organizations.

Simon and Agazarian (2000), for example, provide the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction (SAVI), a tool for looking at nine categories of communication occurring in a group: fight, flight, and compete as avoidance categories; personal information, factual information, and influence as contingent categories; and empathize, data processing, and integrate as approach categories. The tool can be used to analyze verbal behavior of a group system to assess communication patterns in the group. It also
categorizes approach and avoidance behaviors, which can influence patterns of communication and indicate the stage of a group’s development. SAVI can be applied to help groups move from avoidance statements, including those that introduce ambiguity or contradiction, to approach communication, which includes statements that indicate transfer of information across an intrapersonal or interpersonal boundary. From this research and from the Esquivel and Kleiner (1996) study of A- and C-type conflict, it is evident that focusing on the content of a topic versus personal statements is more likely to produce a positive effect on the decision-making process. Schwenk (1997) confirms this idea when he summarizes that “useful conflict involves constructive discussion of substantive differences in views (or cognitions) of a problem or decision. In harmful conflict…interpersonal animosities and negative feelings hinder constructive discussion” (p. 2).

In Stone et al.’s (1999) work on difficult conversations derived from the Harvard Negotiation Project, they hold that “the long term success and even survival of many organizations may depend on their ability to master difficult conversations” (p. xi). They say that much of the research on difficult conversations is related to how to handle the conversations differently, which is not always helpful. Instead, they promote moving from a “message delivery stance” to “a learning stance” (p. xi). Although the work is not focused only on dissent, there are four main behavioral concepts from the Stone et al. (1999) research that appear to be applicable to the dissenter in organizations. First, the idea of listening to understand is applicable when dissenting because the dissenter disagrees with a decision or topic, and the dissenter needs to fully understand the
prevailing point of view. Second, the idea of inviting others to be partners in sorting out the situation is another useful behavior for the dissenter. This may reduce the likelihood that the dissenter puts others on the defensive or creates an environment where there are sides. Third, explaining what one hopes to accomplish and shifting to a stance of learning, sharing, and problem-solving are other behaviors applicable to a dissenter. Knowing what one hopes to accomplish can decrease the likelihood that the receivers of the message will assign erroneous intentions to the messenger. Finally, inventing options that meet each side’s most important concerns and interests is a process that can contribute to a dissenter’s effectiveness. This aligns well with previously mentioned work on managing paradox and generating alternative options (Martin, 2007; Covey, 2012; Jacobson, 2012). In summary, the work on difficult conversations provides relevant support for specific skills and behaviors that apply to the effective dissenter.

The final source from which to draw effective dissenter behaviors is the Grenny et al. (2002) work on crucial conversations. They define a crucial conversation as a discussion that has three elements: Stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. While this research uses examples from personal life, it also provides many workplace examples and is quite applicable to the role of dissenter. One of the key skills identified by Grenny et al. (2002) is the ability of the messenger to focus on what he/she really wants for himself/herself, for others, and for the relationship. This requires the ability to reflect in the moment and adjust one’s behavior according to one’s overall goal in the situation. Individuals sometimes mistakenly think there are only two choices in a crucial conversation, to support one view or another, resulting in a clear winner and loser.
Similar to the idea of being able to hold two paradoxical ideas, the ability to explore more than two options clearly contributes to effective dissent. This theme is once again emphasized and speaks to the idea of generating an idea to meet the goals of multiple parties.

Additional behaviors contributing to effective communication involve demonstrating mutual respect and establishing a mutual purpose (Grenny et al., 2002). Behaviors that contribute to mutual respect are more likely to promote positive conflict versus the negative conflict that comes from competition or personal attacks. This is consistent with Simon and Agazarian’s (2000) SAVI category of empathy, which includes verbal statements such as those that mirror the other’s feelings or even those that involve affectionate jokes.

Grenny et al. (2002) also recommends avoiding silence and violence, that may involve behaviors on a continuum from subtle manipulation to verbal attacks to unnecessary disagreement. These behaviors are consistent with Simon and Agazarian’s (2000) avoidance behaviors of fight, flight, and competitiveness. A dissenter should make statements to ensure that receivers of the message know they are safe and are not being personally attacked or that erroneous intentions are not being assigned to the dissenter. Although unnecessary disagreement should be avoided, dissenters should talk about the real issues and confidently express views while exploring and being open to others’ views (Grenny et al., 2002). This idea of exploring other views is consistent with the comments of Stone et al. (1999) on listening, learning, and sharing. This is where similarities between dissent in the communication literature and dissent in the
organizational literature are noticeable. Finally, apologizing when respect has been violated and addressing misunderstanding during crucial conversations leads others to understand that there is mutual respect and mutual purpose. Mutual respect is important because it is a condition for safe conversations and more effective outcomes (Grenny et al, 2002).

Organizations have many opportunities to adopt practices that encourage effective expression of dissent. Simon and Agazarian (2000), Stone et al. (1999), and Grenny et al. (2002) all provide descriptions of communication behaviors and emphasize the steps necessary to be effective. Table 1 highlights four behavioral themes referenced across these three sources.

Organizational Practices to Encourage Dissent

In addition to understanding the research on effective individual dissent behaviors, a background on organizational practices that encourage dissent will provide an understanding of gaps in the literature. If organizational practices are not in place to allow opposing views, the leader’s behavior and an individual dissenter’s behavior may be less relevant. Sound decision-making processes consider multiple alternatives, surface and test assumptions, allow dissenting views to emerge, consider dissenting views, and build high levels of commitment among those responsible for implementation (Roberto, 2013; Heath & Heath, 2013).
Table 1. A summary of effective dissent behaviors across three sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listen and Learn</strong></td>
<td>Verbal behaviors that demonstrate that information has been transferred from one speaker to another by accurately reflecting another’s ideas (data processing).</td>
<td>Move from a message delivery stance to a learning stance.</td>
<td>Explore others’ views. Listen to ensure erroneous intentions are not being assigned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on Task vs Avoidance Behaviors</td>
<td>Verbal behaviors that descriptively convey or solicit facts about the world or the self that can be verified by observation… (factual information). Avoidance behaviors include fight, flight, and competitiveness.</td>
<td>Explain what one hopes to accomplish and shift to a stance of learning, sharing, and problem solving.</td>
<td>Talk about the real issues and confidently express views. Reflect in the moment and adjust behavior according to one’s overall goal. Avoid silence, violence, and unnecessary disagreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express Acknowledgement of Others’ Point of View</td>
<td>Verbal acts that convey messages that are emotionally meaningful and close to the heart of the speaker or the listener (empathize)</td>
<td>Invent options that meet each side’s most important concerns.</td>
<td>Be open to others’ views. Act with mutual respect and mutual purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate</td>
<td>Cooperative acts that integrate communication between two or more people. Ideas are built on, without competing or preempting (integrate).</td>
<td>Invite others to be partners in sorting out the situation together.</td>
<td>Messenger focuses on what she wants for herself, others and the relationship. Apologize where appropriate and address misunderstanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leaders must cultivate constructive conflict so as to enhance the level of critical and divergent thinking, while simultaneously building consensus as to facilitate the timely and efficient implementation of choices that they make. Managing the tension between conflict and consensus represents one of the most fundamental challenges of leadership (Roberto, 2013, p. xv).

The ability to dissent, then, seems to be influenced by a combination of organizational practices, leadership guidance, and individual behaviors. If an organization does not have processes or models in place for decision making, effective dissent may only occur in pockets of the organization where there are good leaders or effective individual influencers. The current study aims to examine organizational practices to test this assumption and to learn how prevalent decision-making practices are in organizations. In organizations that encourage dissent, does this come more from a cultural norm or philosophy, or do specific practices exist to seek out and evaluate alternative viewpoints?

Many researchers mention the importance of framing a problem or asking the right questions to generate new insights (Roberto, 2013; Heath & Heath, 2013). How a problem is defined can limit the options considered for solving the problem. This is especially important when those who define the problem are in a position of power (Kaminstein, 1996). If a sufficient culture to encourage dissent does not exist in an organization, even a good decision-making process will not prevent faulty decision making.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Although there seems to be agreement in the literature that soliciting and considering opposing viewpoints can lead to better decisions (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1972;
Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Nutt, 1999; Roberto, 2013), there are significant gaps in the literature. The value of dissent has been studied for many years, and specific recommendations have been made to encourage opposing views and seek alternatives when making decisions. However, not many studies have been conducted to determine if organizations are using these recommended practices or other models to encourage alternative viewpoints. Nutt (1999) and Roberto (2013) have researched decisions in organizations and have contributed to our understanding of practices that contribute to better decision outcomes. Are organizations using these practices, and to what extent?

Additional qualitative studies of organizations are important to our understanding of effective practices for encouraging and considering opposing views. Garner (2012) holds that future research could benefit by studying intact, complete organizations to examine the context surrounding dissent success and outcomes. The current research aims to shed light on this void in the literature and to examine the practices of organizations with regard to encouraging or discouraging dissent.
Chapter 3: Methods

The literature review indicates that current research is inadequate when examining dissent from the perspective of organizational practices that encourage dissent. Although there seems to be agreement in the literature that soliciting and considering dissent can lead to better decisions (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1972; Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Nutt, 1999; Roberto, 2013), there are significant gaps in the literature. In addition, the literature on the topic of dissent is limited, and it is unclear the extent to which organizations value dissent and use practices to encourage and consider dissent. Therefore, the current study focuses on the following research questions:

Question 1: What practices or models do organizations employ to solicit and consider dissent in organizational decision making?

Question 2: How do practices that encourage dissent influence organizational decision making?

A qualitative study (refer to Appendix A for the complete interview protocol) using individual interviews was conducted as an effective way to obtain an in-depth understanding of the topic and answer the research questions. Interviewing can be a valuable way of obtaining descriptions of actions and events, particularly those that took place in the past or for situations in which observational access is not possible (Maxwell, 2013). This method was also designed for data collection and analysis that would provide an understanding of practices across many organizations (Patton, 2005). A survey was considered in the early stages of the design of this study. Individual interviews, however, were selected instead to allow for detailed examples and follow up
questions that would not be possible in a survey. Furthermore, the interviews were used in the design to reveal the specifics of organizational practices, how these practices are used, and for what types of decisions. Finally, the intent was for individual interviews to shed light on specific examples of how dissent is encouraged and evaluated and how dissent influenced decision outcomes. The interview questions were designed to answer the research questions using existing literature as a frame of reference (Table 2).

Table 2. Interview questions mapped to potential dissent factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dissent Factors</th>
<th>Interview Question #s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture of Dissent - permits dissent, punishes dissent, encourages dissent formally or through a model, value, belief system, or practice</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Dissent Expression - How widespread in organization</td>
<td>3, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Influence on Dissent Expression and Consideration - variation of leader influence in one organization, differences based on high level leaders</td>
<td>4, 6, 9e</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommended Practices Based on Literature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Question #s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process to Generate/Consider Multiple Alternatives</td>
<td>8b, 9b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather and Analyze Data</td>
<td>8a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assign or Engage Devil’s Advocate</td>
<td>8d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze Downsides to Proposed Course of Action</td>
<td>8c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Oriented Conflict Versus Personal Conflict</td>
<td>9c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>10, 11, 12, 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus groups were considered as an alternative to individual interviews in the early stages of planning this research. A focus group can allow for rigorous discussion of the perceptions of employees about dissent practices and related outcomes. In organizations already identified as having practices that encourage dissent, employees are
likely to be forthcoming with their responses in a focus group. The focus group could also provide a venue to elicit information about whether practices differ based on leaders and specific functional areas of the company. Focus groups can assist with memory recall in that one member may reference a situation that triggers another participant’s memory of the event. Finally, a focus group may reveal shortcomings or unintended results from organizational practices that encourage dissent. Participants are likely to build on one another’s descriptions and understanding of organizational practices.

Despite the advantages of focus groups for this study, there are several disadvantages. Because leaders in organizations are often in different locations, the logistics of arranging an in-person focus group can be challenging. In many organizations, cross-functional leaders meet via webinar instead of at one site. Because I have no previous relationship with the participants, it seems that individual interviews could produce rich data in comparison to a group webinar meeting. Another drawback of the focus group is that participants may be less likely to share thoughts in a focus group than in an individual interview for confidentiality and political reasons. Dissent can be a sensitive topic, and confidential interviews can generate data that are more honest. Finally, more hours could be spent interviewing participants if done individually, and this could generate more examples and allow for additional probing of those examples. Therefore, individual interviews were used as the method to collect data for this study.

**Site and Participant Selection**

A convenience sample of leaders at the director level and above from organizations with significant operations in North America was selected. Convenience
sampling takes advantage of a group that the researcher can easily access (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015). My network provided an accessible group for interview participation. Participants came from my University of Pennsylvania CLO network and my professional network. A list of potential participants was prepared from these networks, and those participants were asked for names of others at the director level and above who would be willing to participate. Thus, this study employed snowball sampling, in which respondents refer other potential participants (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The original intent was to interview 40 leaders who represented 15 to 20 organizations. This was later adjusted to 30 leaders due to time constraints and the repetitive themes evident in the data after approximately 20 interviews. The final sample included 30 leaders from 19 organizations of 50 or more employees. This number was in line with the original goal to study between 15 and 20 organizations. Sixteen participants in the study were female and 14 were male. Fourteen leaders interviewed were senior leaders with executive responsibilities, whereas 16 were functional or business unit leaders. Table 3 provides a list of types of organizations studied and includes categorical information about industry, size, location, and number of leaders interviewed. For de-identification, sex of participant and level of leader is not associated with specific organizations in Table 3.

A comparison of two organizations is embedded in the study. Participants in those organizations were referred by leaders in my network. The mini case studies were comprised of six leaders from one professional services organization and five from another professional services organization.
Table 3. Organizations Represented in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th># Interviewees</th>
<th>Revenue</th>
<th>HQ location</th>
<th>Area of Operation</th>
<th># Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare/ Life Sciences 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.1-10b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>regional</td>
<td>51k-100k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare/ Life Sciences 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.1-10b</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>&gt;100k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare/ Life Sciences 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1-5b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>regional</td>
<td>5k-30k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Svcs/Insur  1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>301m-500m</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>national</td>
<td>&lt;500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Svcs/Insur  2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;100m</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>regional</td>
<td>&lt;500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Svcs/Insur  3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>75.1b-100b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>&gt;100k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Svcs/Insur  4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1b-5b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>national</td>
<td>5k-8k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Association</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Non Profit</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>&lt;500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional 1 Services</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>501m-1b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>2k-5k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional 2 Services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.1b-10b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>8k-15k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional 3 Services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100m-200m</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>regional</td>
<td>&lt;500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional 4 Services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>201m-300m</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>500-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional 5 Services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100m-200m</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>500-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional 6 Services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>201m-300m</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>500-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation/ Utility/Energy 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.1b-50b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>51k-100k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation/ Utility/Energy 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1b-5b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>national</td>
<td>5k-8k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation/ Utility/Energy 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.1b-10b</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>North America</td>
<td>&gt;100k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>75.1b-100b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>&gt;100k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>51.1b-75b</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>&gt;100k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total - 19 organizations</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition, 17 organizations representing 90% of the sample in the study are head-quartered in North America. I had planned to limit the study to organizations based in the United States (U.S.). This criterion was expanded to include organizations with significant operations in North America because an increasing number of individuals in my network work for global organizations. I was unaware, for example, that two leaders who are located in the U.S. actually work for organizations with headquarters in Europe. This was revealed at the end of their interviews when demographic information was collected. Because both organizations have significant operations in North America, their data was included in the study.

To facilitate a broad understanding of the variation of practices encouraging dissent, purposeful sampling allowed me to select a heterogeneous group of organizations of various sizes from multiple industries. Small sample sizes of great diversity “yield important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity” (Patton, 2005, p. 235). Although the goal was to obtain a heterogeneous sample, schools, retail companies, government organizations, and small organizations with fewer than 50 employees were excluded from the study. The culture of dissent may be significantly different in these types of organizations. Dissent may also be uniquely different in very small or start-up organizations with fewer than 50 employees. Maxwell (2013) describes purposeful selection as a term used commonly in qualitative research to indicate that particular settings, people, or events are deliberately selected to accomplish research goals. Purposeful sampling in this study was necessary
to exclude specific groups while achieving a broad cross section of participants based on number of employees, revenue, and industry.

A limitation to convenience sampling can be coverage bias in that the sample may limit the representation of the population of interest (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015). Although my network is regionally diverse, purposeful sampling allowed me to target participants from my network who represent various industries and organizational sizes. This type of sampling also serves to mitigate the effects of coverage bias.

Another consideration for inclusion in the study involved the willingness of an organization and associated leader to participate in interviews and the goal of studying organizations from a cross section of industries, sizes and regions. Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select willing participants. Finally, typical case sampling was used as a specific purposive sampling strategy. Typical case sampling involves choosing cases, with the assistance of key staff or participants, identified as typical in the organization with regard to the selection criteria (Patton, 2005).

**Methods of Data Collection**

Interviewees were contacted via an introductory email to ask for participation in an individual interview. Interviews were primarily conducted via telephone to facilitate scheduling in consideration of leader availability and location. Three of the 30 interviews were conducted in person. Permission for recording interviews was requested, and interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. Participants were assured of confidentiality in that digital audio files were coded, were not labeled with names, and would be deleted following the completion of the dissertation study. Transcription
services were used to convert the data into typed files of comments. These transcripts were only accessible to the researcher and the dissertation committee. Transcription comments were supplemented by researcher notes made during and after interviews to provide details, observations, and other contextual information that could be helpful as a reference during data analysis.

The interview questions facilitated an understanding of organizational culture as well as more formal models or practices that exist in the organization (see Appendix A). Interviews were initially designed to be 60 to 90 minutes in length. Interview questions were piloted with two leaders, after which it was determined that 60 minutes was sufficient to answer the interview questions. Questions were also reordered after the pilot interviews to start with more general questions and progress to more detailed questions. This allowed for a smoother flow of information provided by participants. After several participants were interviewed for the study, questions were adjusted slightly again to make several questions opened ended and to allow for a range and variation in answers. For example, question number six was changed from “Does the tenure or level of employee have an influence on whether or not dissent is expressed?” to “How does the tenure or level of employee influence whether or not dissent is expressed?”

In addition to gathering data through interviews, participants were asked to provide artifacts and written documents related to values, missions, or policies used for dissent encouragement or decision-making processes. Most information that supplemented interviews came from public company websites. An announcement for an innovation challenge was provided by one participant who is a leader in an organization
that stands out with respect to practices that encourage dissent.

**Methods of Analysis**

Interview data were analyzed by categorizing comments and coding those comments based on frequency and themes identified across interviewees. Some categories that were expected to emerge from the data were: value statements about dissent, decision making or other practices; corporate lingo influencing dissent; cultural norms; conflict norms (positive, negative, silence); leader behavior (encourage or discourage dissent); examples or stories of when reaction to dissent positively or negatively influenced decisions (including innovation, mistakes); and negative influences of dissent encouragement. Coding was inductive in that explanations were built from the ground up based on what was discovered in the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Analysis also had a deductive element in that four categories derived from the literature (culture, extent of dissent, leader influence, and practices) were applied as a framework to code and analyze the data. Within each identified category, coding of specific information allowed for important analysis. For example, when specific organizational practices were found in the data, the type of practice, such as a procedure for generating multiple alternative solutions to a problem, was coded. These codes allowed for analysis of dissent encouragement practices and their associated influence on decision-making outcomes for the organizations studied. In addition, these practices were compared to recommended practices in the literature to determine which practices organizations employ and whether they use practices that are not mentioned in the literature.
Limitations

Because the qualitative data was based on comments reported in interviews, biases may have come into play such as recall error, politics, and self-serving responses (Patton, 2005). Participants were asked about examples of key decisions made in the past and how dissent influenced those decisions. This information was based on the participants’ memories of past events. Recall error may be mitigated by interviewing multiple leaders from the same organization. Even though each leader may have different examples, data can be viewed across interviewees for increased understanding of organizational practices. The mini case studies allowed for such a process in that multiple participants from the same organization were interviewed.

The analysis of the qualitative data is also based on my interpretation of the data. This presents a limitation in that I, as the researcher, may filter information based on my experience and misperceive the answers in some way. Moreover, I may selectively perceive what I hear in the interview (Patton, 2005). Finally, as an interviewer, I can ask about external events and obtain verbal remarks, but I cannot know what is going on internally with participants’ thoughts and emotions (Patton, 2005). Telephone interviews may increase the problems associated with interpretation because the phone does not allow for visual cues that can be observed during an in-person interview. Visual cues can provide information about when follow-up questions and further exploration of a topic is helpful. Documentation may present yet another limitation because it may be outdated or not widely used by departments and divisions in the organization. Some employees may have access to the documents while others may be unaware of the documents.
Furthermore, because only 30 leaders and 19 organizations were studied, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population of organizations. Because the organizations for the study were selected based on convenience sampling, this presents another limitation to generalizability. Survey participants came from my network and were not randomly chosen, which makes the results not generalizable.
Chapter 4: Results

This chapter reports the data and indicates themes and information gleaned directly from the interviews. The chapter will first provide background on the coding process. The data will then be explained by code category. At the end of the chapter, the overall findings of the study will be summarized based on answers to the research questions. The findings will also include a report on data from two mini organizational case studies. Furthermore, the findings section will highlight organizational practices employed by organizations that stand out as having a high level of dissent encouragement as reported by interviewees. Chapter 5 will then explore the meaning of the data in relation to the literature.

Two types of data analysis provided a framework to understand the results. First, to analyze the data inductively, codes were established for key concepts, observations, and themes that emerged from participant interviews. Second, a deductive analysis allowed for a review of the data in relation to four categories derived from the literature: culture, dissent expression, leader influence, and decision-making practices. The four main phases used to code the data are described below.

Phase 1: Inductive coding produced themes that emerged from participant interviews, such as cost pressure, consequences, and dissent paradox.

Phase 2: Deductive coding was applied after rereading transcripts; it used the four categories derived from the literature mentioned above. An example of a deductive code is senior leaders set the tone for expression of dissent.
Phase 3: Inductive and deductive codes were reviewed and combined into 54 codes. All codes were organized into five main categories and themes under those categories.

Phase 4: Codes with similar topics were combined, resulting in 54 codes being condensed into 39 codes in five main categories. See Table 4 for a list of codes.

The aim of the study was to explore dissent in organizations and identify practices organizations use to encourage and consider dissent. The intent of the study was also to gain an understanding about how dissent influences decision outcomes. The research questions are:

Question 1: What practices or models do organizations employ to solicit and consider dissent in organizational decision making?

Question 2: How do practices that encourage dissent influence organizational decision making?

The study was qualitative because this method provided an in-depth look at specific practices employed by organizations through detailed one-on-one interviews. Through these interviews, participants shared examples of dissent encouragement and associated practices or the absence of such practices. Thirty leaders at the director level and above from 19 organizations with 50 or more employees were interviewed. Schools, government agencies, and retail organizations were excluded from the study. Two mini case studies were embedded in the study. The case studies were comprised of six leaders from one professional services organization and five from another professional services organization.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Category</th>
<th>Theme Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Culture/History of Organization</strong></td>
<td>1. Senior leaders set the tone for expression of dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. CEO does not encourage dissent expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. CEO models dissent encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. A practice established early in the organization's history influences dissent today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Level of dissent expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Dissent is encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Level of debate in the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. The organization has core value statements related to dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Dissent is listened to and considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Dissent is ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Organizational philosophy about dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Factors Influencing Dissent Expression</strong></td>
<td>10. Confidence of dissenter influences the expression of dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Millennials’ expression of dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Tenure influences the expression of dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcategory B1 - Power</td>
<td>13. Level of dissenter position/production influences expression of dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Employees less likely to express dissent in presence of power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Dissent takes place at the top levels of the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcategory B2 - Safety and Consequences</td>
<td>16. Reluctance to report in the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17. Dissent decreases if past opinions were not acknowledged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18. Dissent expression is related to real or perceived consequences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Code Categories and Themes (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Category</th>
<th>Theme Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subcategory B3 - Group Roles</strong></td>
<td>19. Group roles or &quot;personalities&quot; influence dissent expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20. Role of devil's advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21. One-on-one and small group dissent vs larger group dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22. Perception of whether time it takes to listen to dissent is valuable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23. Method of dissent—email vs in person vs phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Connection between Dissent Expression and Decision Making</strong></td>
<td>24. Examples of improvement/innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25. Examples of mistakes made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26. Examples of mistakes avoided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27. Cost or time pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. Interviewee and Organizational Views about Dissent</strong></td>
<td>28. Interviewee is conflicted about dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29. Paradox—leaders who dissent are valued. Diplomacy also valued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30. Perception of Terms—Dissent, Debate, and Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E. Decision-Making Practices</strong></td>
<td>31. A few people make all key decisions/executive in charge makes decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32. Decision made by vote, consensus, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33. Identify the perspectives of key stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34. Method to focus conversation or move to conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35. More than one option is considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36. There is a process to gather data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37. Method to address personal vs task oriented conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38. Risk of potential choices is evaluated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39. Dissent voiced over a period of time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For interview quotes, the month of the interview is cited, but not the day of the month for further de-identification. This decision was based on the concern of several participants that interview remarks remain confidential. Five main industry categories were represented in the study (Table 5).

Table 5. Industries/Types of Organizations Represented in the Study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Healthcare/Life Sciences</th>
<th>Hospitals, home healthcare companies, life science companies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Services/Insurance</td>
<td>Broker dealers, investment banking, and insurance brokerages and holding companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Associations</td>
<td>Non-profit professional associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
<td>Includes management consulting, performance improvement, learning, and strategy consulting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation/Utility/Energy</td>
<td>For profit utilities, oil and gas companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Hardware and software developers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Level of Dissent Expression**

Each of the 19 organizations studied were assigned a score on the level of dissent expression reported by interviewees. The dissent expression score was determined by reviewing participant responses to the following questions and rating the organization on a scale of zero to five, where zero represents no dissent encouragement and five represents the highest score on dissent encouragement.
1) Is there an organizational philosophy or culture related to expression of dissent?
   Do people behave according to this culture or philosophy?

2) Please describe any procedures in place that encourage people to agree or disagree
   with a course of action.

3) When someone in your organization disagrees with a course of action or a
   decision, what does he/she typically do?

4) How do decision makers react to dissenting opinions? How does the CEO react?
   Other leaders? Can you think of some examples?

The criteria in scoring the responses to these questions included: the organization
has a philosophy with regard to encouragement of employee expression of thoughts and
behaviors in the organization match the espoused philosophy; senior leaders model
dissent encouragement; there are ongoing practices in the organization to obtain
employee feedback or input; input is heard, considered, and often influences decision
making. Although some organizations were reported to have subcultures or pockets of
dissent encouragement in some parts of the organization, a high score was assigned only
to those organizations for which accounts of dissent encouragement indicated widespread
adoption in the organization. A breakdown of mean scores by industry is summarized in
Table 6.

**Culture**

The data in this study indicate that culture is a key ingredient to whether dissent is
expressed in an organization. Eight participants representing five organizations reported
Table 6. Mean Dissent Expression Scores by Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Dissent Expression</th>
<th>All Industries</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Svcs</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Services/</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care/Life</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Profit - ProfAssn</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation/Utility/</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a high level of dissent expression in their organizations. There are two main factors contributing to this culture of dissent. The first relates to the history of the organization, and the other is based on behavior modeled by senior leaders. Data related to history will be reported first followed by data about senior leader behaviors. Ten out of 30 participants in five organizations reported an organization with a culture that started from the beginning of the organization and continues today. Interviewees from two organizations reported a history that does not encourage dissent, but those organizations are currently focused on changing the culture to allow for dissent. For those organizations that have encouraged dissent from the beginning, one participant described a history of dissent encouragement based on how clients and consultants are treated:

One of the things we also say to consultants is that they should feel free to speak up and tell the clients, our clients, what they think and not what the clients like to hear and that's really part of our DNA… You know, some… firms are more top-down like the CEOs voice and they need to cascade down your organization where the CEO has predetermined. Our culture is much more open, and actually,
we have a culture of consensus within the firm. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018)

The above quote illustrates how widespread the culture of dissent encouragement is in the organization in that speaking up is said to be in the organization’s DNA. The participant differentiates this type of culture from a hierarchical culture in which the CEO dictates the course of action for key decisions. All five interviewees in this organization expressed similar sentiments about the breadth and depth of input shared in the company.

In contrast to the example above where the organization’s history sets a tone for dissent encouragement, another interviewee shared a history of dissent suppression:

I think a majority are probably reluctant. There are legacy, political tones in the organization that probably make people feel uncomfortable to do that. I think it's history. It's, you know, the reason for the way they act, it's just history. Well, legacy, as I said, you know, understandings of where the organizational power is both formally and informally. And perhaps a feeling that even if they say anything, it's not gonna matter, other than it may adversely impact them. (Interviewee 17, personal communication February, 2018)

Whether the history encourages or discourages dissent, participants reported that history often plays a role and is connected to the current culture. At times, the organization recognizes its history with regard to dissent and makes a conscious decision to change it.

Core Values

Although study participants were not specifically asked about core values, 16 interviewees representing seven organizations mentioned organizational core values in response to the question: Is there an organizational philosophy or culture related to the expression of dissent (a belief that people should voice concerns or keep concerns to themselves)? Core values are statements about what is important to the organization. Core values are often shared with employees and sometimes clients in literature and on
the organization’s website. Some organizations also promote core values to employees in posters on the walls of corporate offices. Core values stated by the organization may represent values and ideals that were promoted from early in the organization’s history. On the other hand, core values may represent the organization’s current day philosophy or even a reaction to a previous culture and a desire to change. Table 7 includes core values statements reported by participants. One interview shared this perspective:

So the philosophy is communicated in sort of the value statements of the organization of the idea that you should think a little bit bigger, that you should embrace discomfort and that was reinforced not only in something as simple as like our values would be listed, as soon as you walk into the office it was listed on a wall. Everyone had their own individual cards, professional cards, and on the back of the card it would say, 'Think a little bit bigger,' or 'Think outside the box,' or something like that. And then it was also reinforced in sort of how decision making happened for some of the big projects, the leaders’ transformational projects we were doing, so usually the people that were invited to those conversations were from different parts of the business and they got to voice, you know, and react to what may be going on at any given time. So that was I think something that they tried to live out to a certain extent. (Interviewee 10, personal communication, February, 2018)

At times, the core value statements are seen by interviewees as more of an advertisement than a reality, as reported by this participant: “Some of it was more about creating the impression rather than actually embracing it” (Interviewee 10, personal communication, February, 2018). Other participants describe core values that truly represent the culture:

One of their core beliefs is like there's no dumb idea and ideas could come from anywhere. They're really good about that. Even though they're not a Google or an Apple in the sense of being non-traditional and not as formal, they have a non-formal mentality about express yourself, there's no dumb idea. There's a format of learning but there's no dumb way to bring stuff out. Once we can hear you, we can formalize it. (Interviewee 11, personal communication, February, 2018)
Table 7. Sample Core Value Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Core Value Statement</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
<td>Curious Mindset (not judgmental)</td>
<td>Be open to differences, new ideas, and new ways of doing things.</td>
<td>All Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
<td>Openly and Vigorously Debate</td>
<td>After a decision is made, be unified in commitment to the decision</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Risk Taking Value: Challenge the Status Quo</td>
<td>Employees are encouraged to take risks</td>
<td>All Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Behavior: Constructive Confrontation</td>
<td>Aggressively debate the topic</td>
<td>All Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
<td>Be professional and Ethical</td>
<td>Part of this value includes speaking up</td>
<td>All Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
<td>Express Yourself, There is No Dumb Idea.</td>
<td>Ideas can come from anywhere in the organization</td>
<td>All Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
<td>Think a little bit bigger.</td>
<td>Embrace discomfort and think outside of the box</td>
<td>All Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation/Utility/Energy</td>
<td>Open Door Policy</td>
<td>Come in and share your ideas and concerns</td>
<td>All Employees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Still others refer to a core value created specifically to propel positive change within the organization and the business:

> We went through a process of saying, defining what are the leadership values, or leadership behaviors that we were going to embrace and adopt. One of those values, the second one actually, is to debate vigorously and honestly so there's an expectation if you're gonna be part of the leadership team, that you're gonna stand up for your opinion. And now once a decision is made by the group, then we stand behind it and the debate's over at that point...we’re trying to adopt a new culture. (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018)

Some of the organizations with a high level of dissent encouragement have a core value related to speaking up, whereas others do not have a core value explicitly related to dissent. One participant commented on core value statements related to speaking up:

> You know what my personal opinion is? The moment you need a policy, you've already lost the war, right? Because, I mean, then you don't have a culture in place that does that. If you have to put it on a shirt and put it on the walls, I mean, that means, like, people are not there yet, right? (Interviewee 30, personal communication, March, 2018)

This participant clearly does not believe that stated core values have much to do with employees expressing opinions. However, this participant works for an organization that has a core value related to speaking up. The participant believes that the culture drives the presence of dissent and did not mention the core value. Others leaders from the organization did mention the core value. Although core values can be representative of an organization’s culture, they are not consistently connected to culture. On the other hand, interviewees did consistently link the CEO and senior leaders to the culture and dissent behaviors.

**Leadership Influence on Culture of Dissent**

Eighteen participants representing more than 50 percent of total participants, mentioned that CEOs and senior leaders set the tone for whether dissent is encouraged or
discouraged in the organization. A total of 26 comments were made by the 18 participants. Although many participants, particularly those from very large organizations, mentioned that dissent encouragement takes place in pockets of the organization and not others, leader behaviors were mentioned as a key factor in promoting a culture that is open or closed to alternative viewpoints. In all five organizations where an interviewee reported that the CEO models dissent encouragement, the organization scored high on dissent encouragement. Conversely, in the organizations where the CEO or senior leaders were reported to suppress dissent, the organization reportedly has had challenges seeking and obtaining different points of view from employees.

The comments from several participants illustrate how senior leadership sets the tone for encouraging or discouraging dissent:

**Senior Leader(s) Encourage Dissent:**

Our CEO is very open. He really does try to listen to different points of view. I kind of actually find it quite impressive to be honest with you. And he would hear things that are negative. You could tell he doesn't like it, but he will listen to it…in the field, we send out surveys at least twice a year to kind of get a pulse test with all of our key leaders as to what's going on, what they would be doing differently. Sometimes, (the CEO) will send out a note just to COOs, "What would you do if you were in my shoes as a CEO?" (Interviewee 34, personal communication, March 2018)

My experience with … the CEO is that he's open to listening and, you know, and if he feels strongly enough, he'll take a call because he's the CEO and he can do that or he'll, you know, broker some kind of a compromise, help our group compromise. So, you know, it doesn't feel sort of dictatorial. (Interviewee 35, personal communication, March, 2018)

And leaders, you know, were expected to hear the question to respond, if they didn't have any answer, to you know, respond to it after with information as well. So it was very public. These were the founders of the company. The CEO, VP, all
very, very senior and very publicly challenged on the spot in a courteous manner, but absolutely challenged. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, June, 2018)

The CEOs referenced in the above statements demonstrate that they are willing to hear and respond to difficult employee questions. They provide access for employee dissent and seek it out intentionally. Other CEOs and senior leaders send just the opposite message to employees.

**Senior Leader(s) Do Not Encourage Dissent:**

If you worked for him, you weren't even allowed to speak in a meeting unless you thoroughly understood what you were going to say before the meeting even started. (Interviewee 19, personal communication, February, 2018)

I've been in a room with the CEO and in front of the classroom, and someone asks kind of a dissenting question. And he answered it, kind of squashed it. It wasn't brought up again. So it's an open environment but no one challenged him on the answer. (Interviewee 32, personal communication, March, 2018)

There is something that the VP has said openly at meetings and it's a little bit tough. (I think it might link to this so tell me what you think). She said there are three things you can do if you don't like something in this organization. She said 'You can ignore it; number two, bring it to me and we can try to change it; or number three, leave.' So she's tough. She tells people upfront and I remember her saying this at one of the first meetings when I was a new employee and I was like wow. She's like, 'Okay, you can leave; we don't need you,' basically. (Interviewee 26, personal communication, March, 2018)

In summary, culture pays a key role in an organization’s actions with regard to encouraging various points of view and dissent. Historical organizational practices and leader behavior are two components that contribute to a culture that encourages or discourages many points of view.

**Factors that Influence Expression of Dissent**

The data indicate that a culture that encourages dissent and seeks out divergent views is clearly linked to the expression of dissent in organizations, as discussed in the
Participants in the study also describe five key factors that consistently influence the expression of dissent across organizations and cultures: 1) Safety and consequences; 2) Power; 3) Tenure; 4) Confidence of Dissenter; 5) Millennials; and 6) Group Roles.

**Safety and Consequences**

During interviews, interviewees were asked: What factors influence whether a person will voice an opposing view? This question generated a great deal of data. A total of 61 comments were made by 23 participants that were related to safety or consequences. This is the largest number of comments coded for any one topic. One prominent theme resulting from these data is that dissent decreases if past opinions were not acted on or acknowledged. Interviewees reported that it is risky to dissent, and employees do not tend to take the risk if they notice that nothing happens when they voice opinions. One interviewee shared this experience:

> You could sense the disagreement and the level of interest in the project just tanked because people just felt like they weren’t being heard, and that it was another person’s decision to make, and there was no reason for them to do anything other than agree and go along. (Interviewee 10, personal communication, February, 2018)

Another participant provides an example of when dissent is heard, but not acted on:

> “What I've witnessed more than anything is people hearing the dissenting view, you present the facts and data, you put all this stuff to support it, and people do nothing” (Interviewee 14, personal communication, February, 2018). Similarly, employees such as this participant come to expect inaction: “I basically learned that he was going to be open to discussion, but there would be no action” (Interviewee 17, personal communication, February, 2018).
Conversely, when dissent is listened to and acted on, there is a likelihood that an individual will feel safe and take the risk to share dissent in the future. “I feel like I could give my dissenting view and be taken seriously by others. It doesn't mean they're always gonna agree with it, but they'll at least take it seriously” (Interviewee 21, personal communication, February, 2018). Participant 5 summarized the importance of not only seeking out dissent but genuinely considering dissent in the following statement:

I think what’s important in dissent is not just the opportunity to voice a dissenting opinion, I think what matters at least in this situation in that group, is evidence that it was considered seriously and implemented when appropriate (Interviewee 5, personal communication, February, 2018).

In addition to the importance of ideas being heard, participants reported that real or perceived consequences are a major factor in whether employees will share their views. The high risk associated with sharing dissent is emphasized by one interviewee: “I think people think I need this job more than I need to express my opinion...I think most of us consider consequences whatever they may be before we express dissent” (Interviewee 8, personal communication, February, 2018). Another participant expressed the fear of consequences this way:

But if I say something wrong, will it come back to hurt me? Will I not get promoted? Will it slow my career path? Will they then not think I'm a team player and overlook me for an opportunity? Could I get fired for this? You know, you can take it to all of those extremes…(Interviewee 21, personal communication, February, 2018)

This participant shared that the consequences were perceived and not real and that no one had actually been fired in her organization for expressing dissent. She indicated that the perception is related to tenure and not understanding the managerial perspective that alternative views are valued. These factors will be explored in more depth later in this
chapter. Based on the data, it is apparent that an environment where employees feel safe is a prerequisite for dissent expression. Employees also need to see evidence that what they say will be acknowledged and considered. They may test this out by sharing dissent several times before making an assessment about whether it is safe to share in that organization and whether there will be consequences for sharing dissenting views.

**Power**

Comments about power emerged from the following two interview questions: 1) What factors influence whether a person will voice an opposing view? 2) How does tenure or level of employee influence whether or not dissent is expressed? The data that emerged in relation to power can be placed into three main categories. The first is related to the level of one’s position in the hierarchy or structure of an organization. The second category is related to the expression of dissent in the presence of an organizational leader. The final category focuses on what dissent looks like when it takes place among leaders of an organization.

**Level of Position or Production.** Fourteen participants made 22 comments that an individual’s level or position in an organization influences whether dissent is expressed. Those in higher levels within an organization are observed expressing dissent more often than other employees. Participant 21 distinguishes dissent expressed by senior levels from that voiced by lower level employees:

> At the high level, management level, executive level, yes, I think they have no problem voicing their concerns. When you get to supervisor and below, I think they have maybe some big problems voicing concerns depending on who they are. That's where I would say the problem exists most in this company is at the lower level. They have a tendency to be afraid to speak their minds even if they don't agree. You know, they'll just fall in line and that's it, even if they think it's
the worst thing in the world, I'm not sure that they would go, "Yeah, but that's gonna go wrong because of X, Y, Z." (Interviewee 21, personal communication, February, 2018)

Another participant took this a step further and stated that it’s not just the level of one’s position but the number of direct reports that influences whether dissent will be shared.

The size of one’s team provides power in one organization, as described by this participant:

When we are having our executive committee meetings and it's all partners or almost all partners, the things that most impact if people speak up, I would say not tenure, it's role. It's leadership role, which is sort of the amount of people you command or that you're in charge of. So for me, I run our largest office and our biggest team. I'd say that gives me way more credibility to speak up and dissent. And also I think people listen way more than if a partner who's let's say, a subject matter expert, like, the head of our...one of our accounting...partners who is an account executive, but doesn't run a big leadership team, or has anyone really as under them. (Interviewee 37, personal communication, February, 2018)

In addition to position level, the level of production (if one is in sales) or the revenue produced by a business unit or leader can put individuals in a position of status or power. Those with a high level of production are reported to express dissent more often, and their dissent is valued more than those with less production.

I would say that anyone who's been in our business as a registered representative for 15 years or more, you know, has the freedom and power to probably locally dissent and have impact now. I would caveat that by saying it depends on production level. And so whether right or wrong, a million dollar producer who's been in the business 15 years who dissents, he or she has a very loud voice. A producer who's been in business 15 years who's only doing $250,000 is irrelevant. Their dissent will be deleted immediately if, you know, whether it's a voicemail or an email but a bigger producer, their dissent will be heard. (Interviewee 38, personal communication, March, 2018)

This account is an example of how sales production influences the expression of dissent in this organization. The data revealed that revenue generated by a business unit also influences the expression of dissent by the business unit’s leader.
So if you're on a good run to where your organization's doing really well, you've got good numbers, you're having a lot of success, then you have one set of behaviors. Basically you can say, 'Look, I'm not doing that,' and you know nobody—You know, they talk about income statement muscles, right? So your income statement's really good so you flex your muscles and say 'Yeah, I'm not doing this.' But when times are tougher, you've got some challenges, your income statement's not as strong, then you're gonna be far less likely to speak up. (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018)

The data reveal that power, whether due to position or generation of revenue, is a factor in whether an individual will express an opposing view in an organization.

**The Expression of Dissent in the Presence of Power.** Power not only influences the likelihood that an individual will share alternative views; the mere presence of a high level individual influences whether others will express dissent. This results from a concern for safety and perceived consequences, as discussed earlier.

Fifteen interviewees, or half of the study participants, made 28 comments about the influence on the presence of power on dissent expression.

There's a hesitation in the beginning to get people to speak freely, and I find that it does work better if I don't have their direct manager or an executive in there, you know, because I think they're afraid that the manager is gonna judge what they have to say. (Interviewee 21, personal communication, March, 2018)

Study participants also commented on the tendency of employees to show agreement with leaders. They observe employees waiting to hear the opinion of a leader before expressing their own opinion. This may indicate that employees are seeking to agree with the leader.

I feel like a senior director, if one of them gets involved and takes a side, then other people are kind of afraid to take the other side because they don't want to be seen as somebody who dissents when it's someone in a leadership position. They become afraid. (Interviewee 26, personal communication, March 2018)
Participant 21 provides additional observations and more explicitly explains why an employee may wait to hear the opinion of the leader before expressing an opinion:

I think at the lower levels, they're like, "Well, I wanna hear what she's gonna say before I say what I'm gonna say." And I think it does silence some people. You know, we've talked about that in some of the trainings that mixed hierarchy doesn't always work real well if you're trying to break some kind of bad habit in the company if it's at the director or manager level and the supervisor or direct reports are there with that person. They're probably less likely to speak candidly, or to even say, "I have a problem. I don't know what to do in this circumstance" for fear that some will be like, “Well, you're an idiot.” (Interviewee 21, personal communication, February, 2018)

The idea of risk surfaces again, this time specifically related to the presence of a leader. Those organizations with a high level of dissent expression take measures to mitigate perceived risk, and these measures can effectively result in comfort with sharing opposing views. Two of the measures reported by interviewees are regular town hall meetings for soliciting employee questions and contests in which employees submit and present their solutions to problems. Additional methods of encouraging employee input and the details of these methods will be discussed in the decision-making practices section of this chapter.

**Dissent Takes Place at Executive Level.** A final observation by nine interviewees (12 total comments) with regard to power is that dissent takes place more often among senior leaders of an organization than among those at lower levels of the organization. In some organizations, the only debate that is observed occurs among the top executives: “I only see debate at the executive level really” (Interviewee 5, personal communication, February, 2018). One executive explained the business problem with dissent occurring primarily at the top of the organization:
The front line employees can make the most difference, but they are less likely to say anything. It’s like a great ship trying to make a turn, but it can’t turn easily. People in the departments can get on speed boats and make turns. They have the ability to go in a different direction, but they are less likely to do it because they don’t see the whole. (Interviewee 1, personal communication, February, 2018)

Power is clearly a factor that influences whether a person will express dissent.

The data indicate that the level of one’s position in the hierarchy or structure of an organization influences whether dissent is expressed and the extent to which it is considered. Employees also withhold or alter responses in the presence of an organizational leader. Finally, dissent is observed more often among those at higher levels in the organization. Power, then, influences the expression of dissent in many ways, and although this plays out differently in different organizations, the influence of power on dissent is a key observation by participants in the study.

**Tenure**

The majority of participants reported that tenure influences the expression of dissent. Two main thoughts with regard to tenure were mentioned by interviewees. The first relates to an employee with less tenure assessing the organization and taking time to understand organizational cultural norms before expressing dissent. The second thought relates to the willingness of employees with less tenure to share early thoughts. This may occur because 1) leaders or coworkers encourage new hires to share observations early to provide a new perspective and add value to the current employer; 2) the newer hire does not yet understand the landscape of the new organization and offers suggestions more freely than other employees; or 3) the newer hire is excited about prior experience or knowledge and has a genuine interest in helping the current employer make improvements.
The minority of interviewees who do not observe tenure as a main influence on the expression of dissent said that the opinion of all employees is valued regardless of years of service.

In theory and what was encouraged both through the enculturation process when there was the employee onboarding and through mentors, it was often espoused, it doesn't matter what your level is, it doesn't matter what your experience is, you should challenge a situation. And they told stories, you know, there are stories where, you know, an intern came in, they saw a mistake, they went to like the head technical person of it and identified the error and showed them evidence that it was wrong and the person went in and fixed it. So, you know, the stories that were told were raised to reinforce that. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, June, 2018)

It’s not tenure, it’s more cultural fit. A junior consultant is expected to challenge the hypothesis. There is a hypothesis and then we come back to confirm the hypothesis. That’s how we work with our clients. So, it becomes very natural for those at all levels to challenge an idea. Sometimes there is a distinction between those that grew up in the firm and new people from other organizations. (Interviewee 15, personal communication, February, 2018)

The following statement is an example of one interviewee’s observations of where tenure does matter, and not speaking up is something one learns from the organization.

Probably people who have been there longer will be the ones [who are more likely to dissent]. I haven't seen many people who are brand new speaking up right away partly because they don't know how things work, they're probably just sitting to learn what everybody has learned, which is probably just keep your mouth shut. (Interviewee 26, personal communication, March, 2018)

Another participant quantifies this idea and mentions institutional clearance, an indication of just how important tenure can be in the company: “I'd also say that there are 2 of our 10 regionals who have been around for a long time. And they've got, I would call it, institutional clearance to dissent, object or provide alternative ideas” (Interviewee 38, personal communication, March, 2018).

And I would say longer tenured employees, 20 years, that are in these kind of support roles, they've got a voice, because one of the cultural values of this firm is
that they don't...they pride themselves on really low turnover. And so when you got higher tenured people dissenting on real issues, they tend to listen. (Interviewee 38, personal communication, March, 2018)

Even within the same organization, there are differences in the influence of tenure on expression of dissent. One participant observed how the style of leadership can be a mitigating factor that encourages those with less tenure to speak up.

Those that are newer in tenure, they're trying to figure out the landscape, particularly those leaders that we have acquired including myself. Right? I mean, I came in through an acquisition. And so, you know, you have other leaders. I have peers that have long history, you know, 30-plus years of history. And even the leaders that I bring in, new leaders that I bring in, you know, I think they're all trying to figure out the landscape. Now a lot of it depends on the ultimate leader. Right? I mean, if the ultimate leader says, you know, to somebody who is new in a role or new from the outside and doesn't have that tenure, "We need your outside perspective." Right? "We need your fresh perspective." You know, and certainly the role that I take when I bring in other senior leaders into the organization. I say, "Look, in my opinion you have 9 to 12 months before your glasses become rose colored. Right? I need outside perspective. I need different thinking." Right? I value the outside view to tell us what we're doing better. I've personally experienced that we have other leaders that say, "I don't want that. I don't want outside perspective." Right? "I don't want anything that is going to challenge what I think is right," which is insular thinking. (Interviewee 20, personal communication, February, 2018)

Tenure, then, influences the expression of dissent, and the outcome is different depending on the culture of the organization and whether the organization values tenure. In some organizations, something else, such as outside perspective or challenging the hypothesis, may be valued even more.

Confidence of Dissenter

In addition to a majority of interviewees reporting on the influence of tenure, 10 participants (14 total comments) also offered the term confidence and expressed that the confidence of the employee relates to whether he or she will share alternative viewpoints. Participants also used the terms comfort level and professional courage to describe...
confident. The following statement is representative of interviewee observations about confidence: “Confidence is another one. I think that you have to be confident in the fact that your voice matters, that your opinion is just as valid as the other perhaps more central or prevailing view” (Interviewee 8, personal communication, February, 2018).

Some individuals in the study related confidence to the age of employees. Millennials are observed to be more vocal by some and less vocal by other participants.

**Millennials**

Although interview questions did not focus on age or generation, it is notable that five interviewees offered that they observe a difference in how much and the method by which millennials communicate opposing views compared to those from other generations. The following example was provided by an interviewee who observed dissent from millennial employees:

But quite frankly, it is also generational where it's funny, we were in like a lunch little thing just having fun with our afternoon and one new hire was going back and forth with me and it was actually a lot of fun for me and what was more entertaining was watching the startled and scared looks on the other people's faces because they're like, 'she doesn't know who she's talking to, does she?'. And the reality was she didn't care, it didn't matter. She wasn't being nasty, she was being very open and she was very comfortable with that. But I would say 15 years ago that would've never happened. And it was, I mean we took it offline and we all laughed about it and kind of chuckled later on and to me it was a social experiment. (Interviewee 23, personal communication, February, 2018)

Similarly, another participant differentiated how vocal millennials are in comparison to Generation X or Baby Boomer employees.

As far as age, it's interesting, we were just having a debate about this and I'm not really a hundred percent sure of how it plays out in our organization all the time but I can tell you that it seems anyway that the millennial group are much more vocal than the Gen-X and the baby boomers who are in the organization. They're just more readily willing to talk about what their expectations are from the employer and how the employer either is or is not meeting those expectations.
Where I kind of feel like the baby boomer generation or even the Gen-X, the older part of the Gen-X generation just has a different set of I don't want to call it like employer graces or—I kind of learned from my parents that there's a time and a place to kind of show dissent and it wasn't necessarily that it could be all the time, but I look at the millennials in my department and they're much more willing to say 'I don't like that,' or 'I don't like when we do that,' or 'Here's an expectation that I have.' It may not be that the organization can meet those expectations, but I think they're definitely more comfortable verbalizing it. (Interviewee 28, personal communication, March, 2018)

One interviewee observes just the opposite phenomenon in his organization: “I see 35-plus-year-olds at least here—I think they're willing to give their opinion and willing to stand up and say 'this is not the way we've done it.' I've been on projects where we've had that” (Interviewee 5, personal communication, February, 2018). In summary, although the study did not focus on generational differences, five interviewees shared that they observe millennials’ willingness to voice their thoughts more than other generations, and one participant observed the opposite phenomenon in his organization.

**Group Roles**

Although participants did not explicitly use the term group roles, they reported on behaviors that indicate roles employees serve in a group. The term personality was often used to describe predictable behavior in group meetings. Two roles were commented on most frequently. The first description refers to individuals who can be counted on in a group to express opposition or dissent. The other role mentioned most frequently relates to those who will never express an alternative viewpoint. The following accounts by participants represent this theme in the data:

I believe that there is a core bunch of people who are comfortable with dissent. I will tell you that there are definitely people who absolutely never express dissent. (Interviewee 8, personal communication, February, 2018)
I think people who naturally challenge things, naturally question things, I think they do it consistently. I also think that you have certain individuals who will express dissent no matter what. (Interviewee 14, personal communication, February, 2018)

Some people are on broadcast mode, not programmed to receive; some people are on receive mode, not programmed to broadcast. That's sort of on the two extremes, but you want someone to make their point of view known when it's a strongly held point of view or one that would be material to the discussion at hand. (Interviewee 25, personal communication, March, 2018)

Others estimated the number of group members who will consistently share an opposing view. Although the percentages stated by the following two interviewees are different, the broader point is made that a small percentage of those in the group will share dissent.

You know, if you did the 80/20 rule, that can be 20% of the group raising 80% of the concerns, issues, challenges. (Interviewee 17, personal communication, February, 2018)

When we're in big group meetings, I think there are 32 of us, and it's always the same four or five people who speak up. Maybe four typically at each meeting. (Interviewee 21, personal communication, February, 2018)

To mitigate the challenge of only a few people expressing views in a group, the following participant shared efforts to involve all group members:

There are some squeaky wheels and there are some people that should speak up more that don't. We tried on either side, you know, to mitigate that. By giving the people that aren't speaking up more voice or other ways to contribute and asking the people that always share to allow other people to share dissent. (Interviewee 32, personal communication, March, 2018)

Another participant received this advice to prevent her from disproportionately sharing in a group: “[A piece of advice] I received a long time ago was you get into a meeting, you've got 20 people, your share of the time is one over 20” (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018).
The group roles described occurred regardless of the culture of the organization or the organization’s score on dissent expression. As mentioned above, participants observed those who always express dissent and those who rarely or never express dissent in a group. The same individuals, however, are reported to behave differently in one-on-one contexts.

**One-on-One versus Group Dissent.** Interviewees shared accounts of clear differences in observations of dissent expressed in a group and dissent expressed in one-on-one environments. Although the data indicate that opposition is expressed in a group by one or more individuals who take on the role of dissenter in the group, no participant reported that an employee is more likely to dissent in a group setting. To the contrary, all comments related to context stated that individuals are more likely to speak up in a one-on-one setting or a smaller, familiar group such as a project group or department meeting.

The following comments from participants 38 and 27 illustrate this point:

I would say that the vast majority of dissent that I've experienced from other people tends to be in one-on-one meetings, not larger group meetings for two reasons…They're still cautious about what dissent could mean to them. Not only from compensation perspective but also from a reputation perspective, and so a lot of people will just not comment because they're afraid to dissent, which is unfortunate. That fear of dissent I think is harmful to an organization because if it's just groupthink, that's a problem. So I do think that there's certainly more dissent that I've experienced one-on-one versus in meeting settings. (Interviewee 38, personal communication, March, 2018)

Of course. [laughs] People are more open in one-on-one meetings, for sure, and then, politically correct. We are very politically correct at [ _____ ], always smoother in large meetings. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018)

In some instances, individuals who raise issues in a group are encouraged to share views in a one-on-one setting instead of the group. Several participants used the phrase “take this offline” to indicate that a conversation outside of the group is recommended.
I think we do a good job, here, at…respectfully differing either way. So if it's one-on-one or it's with a group if you're told no, you're told no in a nice respectful way. You hear the term a lot, "Let's take that offline," meaning, stop talking about that. We'll talk about that one-on-one, later. (Interviewee 32, personal communication, March, 2018)

The idea of risk resurfaces in the data when the topic of group dissent is discussed:

I think larger meetings, it's harder to do opposition because it's a little riskier for the person. One-on-one, I think it's easier to do a little bit more of a…or have an opposing point of view. (Interviewee 34, personal communication, March, 2018)

Related to the concept of risk, participant 36 expressed that a one-on-one setting can promote a more honest conversation.

I think on a one to one basis, I think it's more immediate and maybe more honest, right, at least on average. Because it's a conversation. And if the manager and the employee have a relationship, an open relationship, then they'll have, I guess, an honest discussion. (Interviewee 36, personal communication, March, 2018)

In summary, the data from all 30 participants indicate that dissent is expressed more often in one-on-one settings compared to group settings. Employees perceive less risk and are able to be more honest when outside of a large group.

**Communication Method**

Observations about group roles were reported by interviewees across organizations regardless of whether the organization scored high or low on dissent encouragement. Little difference between in-person and telephone dissent communication was reported by participants. Telephone communication, conference calls, and webinars were reported to be interchangeable in terms of willingness to share thoughts and dissent. However, participants commented that employees who strongly express dissent in email and would never share dissent in the same way in an in-person context. The following statement illustrates this point.
It's safe, it's secure, you're protected, you don't have to look anyone in the eye, you don't have to watch their body language response, you don't have to hear other people, maybe there's other people in this distribution, maybe there's isn't. So it could be private, it could be public. But you're more detached. So it's a safer form and therefore breeds more dissent. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018)

 Participant 35 also mentioned eye contact and went on to compare in-person communication to webinar communication.

I suppose I think people tend to be a little bit more willing to take on tougher things in email because it doesn't require face to face, you know, more eye to eye, "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't agree with me," kind of thing. You could do it a little bit more, you know, behind the cover of an email...Most of the time we don't really use by phone anymore. We use WebEx and so you're you know... video is the same to me. It's the same as doing it in person. You're still kind of looking someone in the eye but, you know, you're looking at them through a screen. So, yeah, I think it's mainly email versus, you know. You know, this is talking on my phone to you right now, it's probably the longest I've talked on the phone for work. We just always use WebEx which is great because, I mean, it does make for better conversations and I think part of that might be around getting people to share their point of view either more candidly or not just because you can see them. (Interviewee 35, personal communication, March, 2018)

Although interviewees observe that some hide behind the cover of email and express dissent in an email more directly than they would in person, this is more pervasive in some organizations than others. Some interviewees rarely see this type of email because of the culture of the organization or because of regulations in the industry. If email is audited by regulators, for example, employees in that organization are less likely to use email as a medium for dissent.

I think if it's really tough, people will not put it in an email. They'd rather have that conversation so it's not documented anywhere. I think it's gonna be more of a personal conversation and part of it's because we're in healthcare, right? So, I mean what you do in healthcare can be...it's documented and it could be opposed. So, you know, if you're gonna have a tough one, it's gonna be one of those situations where you might not wanna have it documented. It would be better to have that conversation. (Interviewee 34, personal communication, March, 2018)
The culture of an organization may also influence whether one sees much email dissent in the organization. Participant 7 sums this up when she states, “It is culturally appropriate here to not have that conversation in an email, you have to have that conversation in person” (Interviewee 7, personal communication, February, 2018). Another participant observed the uniqueness of the culture at her organization: “People who join from other orgs are surprised by how indirect we are. We use email language such as ‘you might think about doing it that way.’ Email is less direct than other places” (Interviewee 15, personal communication, February, 2018). Therefore, the mode of communication an employee uses can influence whether he or she expresses dissent and how that dissent is expressed. The culture of the organization and type of industry are also factors in how dissent will be expressed in various modes of communication such as email.

In conclusion, many factors were reported to influence the expression of dissent in organizations. Safety, consequences, and power are common themes across interviewees. The confidence of dissenters, tenure, group roles, and mode of communication also influence how and whether employees will speak up. These data provide a foundation for understanding the range of practices organizations employ to solicit and consider employee dissent.

**Organizational Decision Making Practices**

Some organizations have practices that encourage employee input and dissent. The establishment and promotion of core values that emphasize employee voice is an example of an organizational practice designed to encourage employees to share their opinions. Organizational decision-making practices can also provide a venue for
employees to speak up. This section will explore the range of decision-making procedures participants reported during interviews. The data indicate that organizations fall on a continuum, from organizations with no process for making decisions to those with specific mechanisms to encourage debate and explore the ramifications of potential decisions.

**A Few Executives Make All Decisions**

In seven out of 19 or 37% of organizations in the study, interviewees reported that a few key executives make all the decisions. In these organizations, employees have little input into key decisions unless they have a direct line of communication with one of the key decision makers. One participant described this process succinctly: “I go back to, there may be consensus but it's consensus of a few” (Interviewee 29, personal communication, March, 2018). Another simply stated, “In the end, most decisions are made by the CEO” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, February, 2018). A third participant expressed frustration with not knowing why a decision was made: “At the end of the day, the consideration isn't done outside of a handful of people, and it's not really done where it's communicated ‘here's why we decided what we decided’” (Interviewee 5, personal communication, February, 2018).

In some organizations, a lengthy process occurs first that generally leads to consensus; but when there is not a consensus, the executive in charge makes the decision. This account was shared by participant 35:

It's more, someone owns the problem or someone owns the question and, you know, gets to hear all of the...take all the feedback and all the opinions and weigh them all and then decide. So voting I don't think really happens at the, you know, the core operating part of the organization. It definitely happens at the partnership
level because it's a thousand people. The only way to really come to a conclusion is to vote. (Interviewee 35, personal communication, March, 2018)

In other organizations, the executive in charge makes the decision with little input from others:

The interesting thing about the idea of having artifacts and the values around, okay we need to push outside our typical boundaries and go into uncomfortable places, was that when it came to actually acting on any sort of decision, that power usually rested in a handful of people. (Interviewee 10, personal communication, March, 2018)

The advantage of a few key individuals making decisions is that decisions can be made quickly. In small but growing organizations, this can be effective especially if there is a particularly talented leader or group of leaders at the top who understand the business. However, as organizations grow, it is more difficult to know what is going on in all areas of the organization, and the lack of input from people who are doing the work can lead to problems.

We decided in running this as 3D model, design, develop, and deliver, most organizations are very heavy on deliver so you have a lot of facilitators who go out and they train classes. So we de-emphasized that, our senior vice president of HR decided that we were no longer gonna be a delivery organization, we were going to design and develop but [we were] not gonna hire 70 people to go around the country training people. That was a huge shift because people felt that they were facilitating and they were not instructional designers and they didn't feel talented in that regard, plus they were being dictated to, nobody talked to them, nobody asked them. (Interviewee 8, personal communication, February, 2018)

An important distinction is made by participants between a leader making a decision after there is a process for input versus a few leaders making decisions with little input. Some organizations, for example, receive much input through lengthy debates, but in the end the leader responsible for the project makes the decision. This is very different from organizations in which most decisions are made by a few leaders. Participants from
organizations with developed decision-making practices have avenues to obtain employee input and do not rely solely on a few key leaders. The decision-making practices will be discussed in the remaining sections under the theme decision-making practices.

**Data Gathering Process**

Eight participants from six organizations (32% of organizations in the study) reported that their organizations have some mechanism to gather data and analyze the data when making key decisions. One participant expressed a company’s emphasis on making decisions based on data in the following statement: “Yes. We are very data-driven. Most people we work for are all consultants, so they love to have their numbers” (Interviewee 30, personal communication, March, 2018). Other organizations seem to rely more on intuition than data when making decisions. The following excerpt from interviewee 34 provides a snapshot of how data is used in the organization.

> We're a really data rich organization. And we can look at trend lines. And when our people... For example, if we're looking at turnover, we will know when they're turning them, if they're turning them the first 30 days, 30 to 60, etc. (Interviewee 34, personal communication, March, 2018)

Another participant expressed how his organization relies on an extensive amount of data and referred to the need to present the data in bite size pieces.

> There was always a large volume of information. You try and distill that to executive sized bites of information and try and limit the length of presentations. Some people were good at that, some people were less good. But sometimes you have to make decisions on imperfect or incomplete information at some point. You just have to say okay, this is all the analysis we're gonna do on this particular issue. This is what we know, this is what we don't know, and based on the information that is available, what's the best decision, what's in the best interest of the corporation and other stakeholders. (Interviewee 25, personal communication, March, 2018)
Some organizations have a specific process for making decisions, and analyzing the data which occurs within that process.

So, the first thing is to diagnose, understand the context, look at the data, diagnose what is working, what is not working. Then the second step is to think about the options and for each option, understand what are the advantages, what are the disadvantages, who would be in favor of option one. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018)

Although six organizations in the study have a process for gathering data as part of the decision-making process, other organizations rely on intuition or limited data when making decisions. “I'd say that we operate too much on instinct and gut and past history than using fact-based data” (Interviewee 38, personal communication, March, 2018). Another interviewee expressed a similar process and stated, “I think the organization, some of its leaders are more anecdotal, they tend towards more of the anecdotal evidence or the qualitative versus the quantitative” (Interviewee 29, personal communication, March, 2018). Gathering data and comparing options may provide a place for employees to dissent. When they observe a decision moving in a direction that ignores data, this can be pointed out as part of the process.

More than One Option is Considered

When data is gathered to make a decision, it may imply that multiple options are considered when making decisions. In this study, 18 participants reported that their organizations consider more than one option when making decisions. Some participants mentioned that only one or limited options are considered. The differences in approach to considering options can be understood through the direct quotes from participants.
**Limited Options Considered:**

You know, I don't know. I think we'd like to think that we look at more than one option but I don't know that I could say that we definitely do. I think we aspire to do that but I would guess that we actually do it far less frequently than we think. (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018)

I think it's limited. There's a lot of binary debates. (Interviewee 11, personal communication, February, 2018)

**Evaluating Options is Part of the Decision-Making Process:**

And typically, [we look at] at least two to four options. (Interviewee 17, personal communication, March, 2018)

We're pretty good at defining options, you know, frankly, from the CEO down, and even encourages, you know, really radical thinking where we can stretch the...we can talk about the topic. You know, really take polar...present very polar opinions. You know, one very extreme to one side, one very extreme to the other, and then a couple in between. And then have the debate. So it's very much so. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018)

Yes, I think we always do...I don't think I've seen a suggestion without one, two, or three options weighing against it. I think it comes from a lot of...the way we work with clients. You always put up options, right? So I think that...I don't think we could go forward with a larger decision and not have options on the table. (Interviewee 30, personal communication, March, 2018)

**Method to Obtain Input**

Gathering data and considering multiple options or alternatives when making decisions can provide a process for obtaining employee input and dissent. Participants cited many other practices to solicit employee opinions and ideas.

**Individual Meetings with Stakeholders.** One participant explained that in her organization, it is important to obtain buy-in from all key stakeholders. To do this, she reaches out to each employee individually.

So, the complexity of us being like that is that we have a consensus culture. So, in reality, you know, when I want to make a change in the organization, first I need to speak to at least, you know, 25 or 30 key stakeholders to understand
everybody's opinion, see where everybody is, and I could never propose something... For example, I just finished interviewing with 16 practice area leaders, you know, we have industry practice areas like healthcare, telecom, and we have instructional practice areas too. And I just spoke to the 16 practice leaders on a specific topic, and I had only 8 who agreed with the proposal and 8 who didn't. In that case, it required further discussion. So, all I'm trying to say, Marikay, is that it's very rare that a change is made or a decision is taken and we have not preemptively spoken to all the key stakeholders and addressed their concerns and make sure that there was consensus for a change. We don't have a top-down organization. We are more of a kind of democracy if you want. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018)

The participant described an environment in which all key stakeholders are given the opportunity to discuss a proposed course of action: "I have almost never seen a decision made that would not have been, you know, really well thought through with all the key stakeholders influence together, the options" (Interviewee 27, personal communication, February, 2018).

**Blogs or Communication from Top Leaders.** A blog or online open forum for leaders to communicate with employees is another method to obtain input described by interviewees.

The president of the organization loves to blog so he's actually done a blog on what to do when you don't feel heard, which generates a lot of conversation about well what does that really mean, is it because they're not listening to my ideas or how do I bring up that kind of a thing? So I think there is this acceptance of dissenting views. (Interviewee 7, personal communication, February, 2018)

Other interviewees referred to similar mechanisms such as the ability to email the CEO and obtain a response.

**Town Hall Meetings.** Another method to obtain employee input transparently in a large group is the town hall meeting. Town hall meetings, in which a division of a company or the entire company gathers, can provide a public venue for employees to
provide input to senior leaders. The meetings may allow employees to call in from other locations, and in some organizations, they are recorded and posted for employee access.

We used to have, and I think they still do have employee town halls where the CEO and other members of the senior executive team would meet and talk and about the business and then there'd be Q & A sessions at the end of those and believe, people participating in those were not shy to express a point of view on things that concerned them, particularly the elected union representatives, but I think a lot of the rank and file didn't hold back in those sessions. So yes and no. I think people would sometimes be circumspect and not express point of view, particularly if it was something that they might deem to be career injurious, if I can use that expression. (Interviewee 25, personal communication, March, 2018)

Participants reported examples of town hall meetings that are held quarterly, and one participant even mentioned weekly meetings with the entire company present or on the phone (Interviewee 40, personal communication, June, 2018).

**Case Team Meetings.** The case team meeting refers to a meeting designed to process a specific project or assignment. These meetings may take place in-person or by telephone or webinar and may include employees or consultants who are working with a client and a manager who provides input and guidance.

We have case team meetings. Everyone comes to share facts, hypotheses, brainstorm, and look at a problem from different angles. It took me 10 years to say I have a boss. It is seldom that hierarchy dictates what happens. This is not at all the standard. (Interviewee 15, personal communication, February, 2018)

The team meeting, in this case, provides a venue to challenge hypotheses and share input as an expected part of the process.

**Post Mortem.** A post mortem is a process used in organizations at the conclusion of a project or initiative to identify what went well and what could be handled differently in the future.

So those were strongly encouraged, often reinforced. They were documented, they were shared across the entire company. So if something went down it was, you
know, very public to our users that there was an issue. The team involved would go through a postmortem and publish what went wrong to the entire company. And it was, you know, a blameless postmortem. So it wasn't about who made the mistake. It was about where in the system did we break down and how can we fix it so that it doesn't happen again. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, February, 2018)

A post mortem is another method for input that provides an avenue for dissent after a project and when a future endeavor is considered.

Solicit Innovative Solutions. Whereas some organizations have meetings and blogs to obtain input, others create events to obtain specific ideas. Three out of 30 participants, representing three organizations, mentioned contests to solve business problems or encourage employees to share their ideas.

Every year we have what's called an innovation challenge and the organization I'm gonna say specifically is charged with looking at the way we do things every day and trying to find a better way to do it. We had one individual from our environmental service team, they used to take down the curtains that were in between the patients in bed one and bed two, take them down, have to obviously clean them, sterilize them and put them back up. And in the meantime patients didn't have as much privacy because the curtain isn't there. And it took honestly time and energy to do that. And in one of the innovations challenges a gentleman made a suggestion that everybody grabs the last two feet of this curtain. That's the part that comes in contact with an individual as you're pulling or pushing the curtain in either direction. And so could the organization make a curtain that has a removable component in those last two feet so that instead of replacing the whole curtain where if you assume a curtain is 10 feet long and somebody's only touching the last 2 feet, instead of having to take down 10 feet worth of curtain, you just detach 2 feet and reattach 2 feet and isn't that a better option? So the organization took that challenge to try and do things better, more efficient and still be able to provide a clean environment and a private environment for the patients and actually created a curtain. (Interviewee 28, personal communication, March, 2018)

When the organization implements an employee suggestion, it sends a message that ideas are genuinely valued. Another participant also mentioned a competition and explained how it is a safe way to share ideas.
Or we had team competitions as well, like where teams would come out and showcase something new that they were doing and those are really good because that was a way for people to express their ideas on what they wanted without feeling threatened that someone was gonna fire them or whatever. (Interviewee 11, personal communication, February, 2018)

One participant whose organization scored high on dissent expression shared an email announcement about a contest to employees (See Figure 2).

Contests, when designed and communicated well, can be an effective way to obtain employee ideas and even prevent dissent in that employees are involved in the development of courses of action and do not have to wait until after an idea is formulated to share their ideas. Furthermore, the organization demonstrates a commitment to employee ideas through providing resources necessary to implement the contest and the financial reward given to the winner.

**Identify the Perspectives of Key Stakeholders.** Although participants observed that contests can be an effective way to bring out employee ideas and new ways of thinking, understanding the perspectives of key stakeholders when making a decision can be another powerful way to solicit employee thoughts about a proposed course of action. Six interviewees reported that the perspectives of key stakeholders are analyzed when considering a proposed course of action. A stakeholder is “one who is involved in or affected by a course of action” (Merriam-Webster online, June 2018). This refers to understanding the viewpoint of those with an interest in a decision and is distinguished from individual meetings with stakeholders. Some examples of stakeholders are an organization’s customers, a salesforce, shareholders, or operations employees. Part of the
Dear Colleague,

At [    ], we are Truly Innovative. This organizational value means we search for innovation in everything we do to help raise the standard of health care. For us, innovation isn't only about research or senior leaders – it’s found all across our growing health system each and every day.

To help tap into our collective entrepreneurial spirit and creativity, we are pleased to announce the launch the 2018 Innovation Challenge. This second annual event is designed to foster innovation across [  ] and potentially develop the next big idea in health care.

The response to last year’s inaugural event was outstanding. Close to 150 submissions were received, and our finalists’ proposed innovations addressed some important clinical and operational opportunities. This included reducing premature births, allowing non-invasive surgical techniques to be used for more complicated procedures, more efficiently managing the collection of lab specimens and measuring patient satisfaction in real-time. We’re currently working with our winners to help them advance their innovations.

A cross-functional committee will evaluate your Innovation Challenge submissions, and up to eight finalists will ultimately be selected to pitch their ideas to a panel of distinguished judges. The winning individual or team will receive up to a XXXX investment from [  ] to progress their cutting-edge idea. Additionally, the Innovation Challenge winner will receive the President’s Award for Innovation – the health system’s most distinguished recognition of employee innovation.

Applications are now being accepted through February 16. To learn more about the program, check out this video, and visit the 2018 Innovation Challenge to view submission guidelines, frequently asked questions and to submit your idea.

We look forward to seeing this year’s submissions, which we know will represent the spirit of innovation that differentiates us and the care we provide to the patients and communities we serve.

Sincerely,
President and CEO                              SVP

Figure 2. Email Invitation to Innovation Challenge
process of identifying the perspective of stakeholders includes discussions about what stakeholders might think about a proposed decision.

…the concept of postmortem where after a problem you do something. There were some teams that did pre-mortems where they would say, "Okay, let's anticipate every possible problem, every possible different perspective and bring in, you know, different views and perspectives. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, June, 2018)

This idea of pre-mortem allows for a process, time, and place where perspectives and dissent can be shared. Stakeholders are not interviewed individually in this pre-mortem example, but decision makers think through and anticipate what each stakeholder might say.

And then, yeah, they wanted to make sure that they were looking at different perspectives or what was often what we would do in meetings is, we would say, "Okay, what's...So we would come to this decision, "What would so and so say and what would somebody else or somebody from this perspective say?" So it's not specifically in the room, in theory what might be an opposing view as well. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, June, 2018)

One participant works in an organization where multiple people volunteer or are assigned to represent the views of key stakeholders.

So often... I'll use my example with four options. In some cases four different staff people could be assigned to "sponsor" like, one, each of the four opinions whether you're emotionally attached to any of them is not dealing with the... It's which one were you assigned into. So, yes, I think that role playing in that owning a particular point of view happens a lot…Using my example, you know, three or four options, who wants to represent decision A, B, C, or D. It could be the boss just decides them, it could be, you know, it's just kinda randomly assigned. So, it can be either way. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018)

Participants in these organizations reported that when there is a process to consider the viewpoints of stakeholders, a good deal of debate also ensues in these decision-making groups.
Evaluate the Risk of Potential Choices. Another procedure that can allow employees to speak up is the process of discussing the risk of potential paths when making a decision. If evaluating risk is part of the process, employees may be expected to raise concerns during this phase of decision making, as illustrated by this participant’s statement: “Yeah. I mean for some of the more significant things we've put in place a risk mitigation plan trying to look at, okay, what are the specific risks to success and how do we mitigate those?” (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018). Another participant expressed a similar process and explained the value in anticipating risk before the decision is made: “We're pretty good about saying where this is gonna go wrong and how are we gonna know that it's going wrong so that we can catch it upfront” (Interviewee 7, personal communication, February, 2018). Participant 17 explained that analysis of risk is employed particularly when the decision involves a significant financial investment.

…a business case analysis, if you will. So, okay, we wanna make this investment, you know, here's the potential outcomes, you know, things of that nature. And certainly, in discussions, we do it quite frequently just because of the nature of our business. You know, we wanna bring a new partner onboard, well, what happens if that partnership dissolves three years from now. (Interviewee 17, personal communication, February, 2018)

The analysis of risk, therefore, is a decision-making process that may allow for various points of view, including voices of dissent, in reference to a proposed decision.

Role of Devil’s Advocate. Only five participants in the study reported that their organizations assigned a devil’s advocate as part of a process for making decisions. Two out of the five participants mentioned a practice the organization previously engaged in but is no longer in use. More than a third of the participants (11), however, remarked that
many employees volunteer to share the view of devil’s advocate. Many even laughed at the thought that one would need to be assigned. The following quote is from a participant of an organization that encourages dissent but does not assign employees to the role of devil’s advocate:

I would say that there's a little devil's advocate in each of our employees. That's the culture, right? So we don't wanna officially do that. But I think through the different initiatives that we have and support systems that we have at the individual, team, and organizational level, it's our culture to offer sort of a different perspective. And, you know, sometimes it's not just devil's advocate, it's just a different perspective, right? I mean, and one of the perspectives is sort of the opposing view. (Interviewee 36, personal communication, February, 2018)

Several participants remarked that prefacing a statement with, “let me play devil’s advocate,” can provide a buffer for disagreeing with a proposed course of action.

No, I don't think we've ever made that assignment, although there are times where personally I've taken that position, but not being assigned to it. But I will say exactly what you just said, "Let me play devil's advocate here, or let me put myself in the role of our competitor in this situation," something like that. (Interviewee 17, personal communication, February, 2018)

Likewise, participant 30 described the phrase as a buffer or something to take the edge out of opposition: “No, people sometimes say in the conversation. Let me take that role and say this and this. It's just a nice way of, you know, taking a bit...the edge out of opposing someone” (Interviewee 30, personal communication, March, 2018). Another participant mentioned that using the phrase can provide a safer environment in which to express dissent:

I don't know if we typically assign that role, but people will actually use that language and say, "Hey, let me just play devil's advocate here and bring up a completely different perspective." And sometimes it is their perspective and they can do that and it could be a safer way. (Interviewee 31, personal communication, March, 2018)
While some think the phrase “let me play devil’s advocate” is a nice way of prefacing disagreement, others think just the opposite. One participant shares displeasure with the use of the phrase:

I'd be a millionaire if I had ten dollars for every time someone said, 'Well let me be the devil's advocate here.' That's a preface to making a commentary, and that's okay, but some of my colleagues, that's all they did was play devil's advocate or take the role of the contrarian. I mean it's the same. Do you want to fit in or do you want to stand out; these people wanted to stand out by challenging everything, like 'It's not that I don't believe this but what if there's a mass revolt for this price hike that we're contemplating implementing,' or whatever. But I can't really say that that contrarian devil's advocate type of role was something that was defined and embedded into our processes. (Interviewee 25, personal communication, March, 2018)

Other participants value the role of devil’s advocate but see the problem with hearing from the devil’s advocate early in the decision-making process. To balance the value and potential problems with the devil’s advocate, the organization uses an alternative phrase as described in the following account of a pre-mortem process.

So the pre-mortem is almost a devil's advocate because you're talking about all the ways that this thing could fail, but we do that after we get really far... We want the idea to be pretty well thought out so that, you know, when you play devil's advocate, if you do that early, if somebody has played devil's advocate, we usually shut that down right away because typically, an idea at the beginning isn't well thought through. And so if I play devil's advocate, I can crush it especially if I'm overly passionate because the idea isn't strong enough yet... So actually we do something different is everyone is encouraged to provide different points of view, but, like, we use a phrase called "What would have to be true?" So if we're looking at an idea and I think it's not going to work so instead of playing devil's advocate, I have to say, "Well, for me to be on board with this, what would have to be true is this." And so if something sucks and I'm like, "Oh, my God. This is such a bad idea. Our clients are never gonna pay that price" I would say, instead of playing devil's advocate, like, "Hey, the pricing for this is all jacked up and our clients aren't gonna pay that." That would actually be very countercultural. I would have to say, "Hey, you know, what would have to be true is that our clients are gonna have to be comfortable paying three times what they already pay now." (Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018)
This difference in observations about the role of devil’s advocate parallels the data on the views about the dissenter. These data on views about the dissenter will be explained in more detail later in this chapter.

**Manage task oriented versus personal conflict.** The majority of participants reported that conflict stays task oriented the majority of the time. “No, I think they are more task-oriented. I mean I don't know that there's been in my, whatever, 19 years here, you know, not too many situations have devolved to personal” (Interviewee 35, personal communication, March, 2018). Similarly, participant 27 shares her experience with conflict in a culture that is fact based and respectful: “Oh no, not personal at all. We are very fact based but we respect individuals and we would never offend, you know. It's very rare that you do personal comments” (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018).

However, some of the same participants went on to provide examples of when conflict became personal.

It depends on the individuals who are debating. Right? You have some people who, you know, we've had individuals in the past where they are a dog with a bone. They will not relinquish. They will not. I mean they just get stuck. And you get to a point where it's not productive. Right? And then you just say, "We're going to take this offline because we got to move forward." (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018)

Another example of conflict becoming personal instead of remaining task oriented was shared by participant 6.

There are certain individuals who will debate far more vigorously with other people and know that there are personal feelings playing into it. But typically the actual debate lends itself to 'here's a specific example of why this is a bad idea,' and it's throwing out facts but doing it in kind of a way, almost like there are barbs and jabs and it is somewhat fact-driven but it's done in a way not let's
logically analyze the facts but more here's the fact to get a shot in for my side type of thing. (Interviewee 6, personal communication, March, 2018)

When conflict does become personal, some organizations have formal processes to manage the conflict, whereas others rely on group self-monitoring or leadership:

I mean, sure at times it became personal. I think the initial situation, you know, if a decision was made or, you know, a group is going in one direction that sparks an email or a dialogue. I have definitely seen situations where the debate evolved and became personal where, you know, you said this or you said that, I disagree, and then it became a personal attack. But I also found that the group monitored itself and someone would jump in and say, "Wait, just to clarify, they didn't say this about you, they actually said this." So it was more kind of self-monitoring. I did see some times when, you know, a senior leader would jump in and say, "Hey, folks, you know, this is not going in the productive direction, let's get back to what the original question is and start over, you know, provide dialogue here. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018)

Another interviewee reported on a technique used to handle personal conflict and return to a focus on task-oriented conflict. In the following example, a group member would suggest that those in conflict take a time out.

When you take a time out, it could be everyone, it could be a pair, it could be two people if they are getting a little too intense. And like, "Hey, take a time out" and then, you know, "Hey, why don't you guys go grab a coffee?" Or, you know, go walk around the block together which is a little annoying sometimes because maybe I don't wanna be around this person….We really respect that we're colleagues, but we're also friends ... Sometimes I wanna rip someone's head off or I'm so frustrated with them but then like, you know, like a lot of us will go...as we're chatting or something, we'll talk about, you know, our kids.... We'll talk about something else in the office or in the region that's happening that we're both in agreement with... let's settle down, like, we're on the same team, we're all friends here….If you're talking about growth or something like that and you got a big dissent, like, it can get pretty frustrating because it may affect bonuses at the end of the year. (Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018)

In summary, two methods were reported to assist in monitoring conflict to keep it task oriented. In the first method, the group or leader makes comments to diffuse the situation and bring the conversation back to a focus on the task. In the second method, a time out
provides a way for the conflicting parties to take a break and connect on a social level to diffuse the personal nature of the conflict.

**Method to Focus Conversation or Move to a Conclusion.** Although the majority of participants reported that they value debate, many indicated that their organizations have no process to move a conversation to a conclusion. In fact, some participants said that this is one of the drawbacks to obtaining input. It may become difficult to consider all views and come to a decision. When there are processes to move a conversation to a conclusion, some of the mechanisms cited by interviewees are formal and others are informal. An example of a formal mechanism is assigning a professional facilitator: “We have a facilitator for team meetings. Two thirds of our projects have this formal facilitation. We take people out of their day-to-day jobs to be a facilitator. [Facilitators] understand conflict, changes, etc.” (Interviewee 15, personal communication, March, 2018). In addition to in-house facilitators, two participants mentioned that their organizations provide documents on how to facilitate a meeting.

It could be an OD [organizational development] expert from our R&D [research and development] organization could facilitate the discussion. We also published resources so anyone could access it on...you know, put it on Box or Google Docs only where the company could access it and just locate the conversation as well. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, March, 2018)

Others use more formal processes to focus a conversation. In these organizations, roles are assigned to group members to keep a group on track with regard to time and process.

We do assign facilitators internal to the meeting sometimes if we know it's gonna be a thorny session or it's somebody on the team or invited to the meeting will be, you know, designated. We have... Some people are timekeepers, some people are facilitators, some people are, you know, as you said before, sponsors for a certain point of view, right, a certain option. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018)
Likewise, participant 28 mentioned the facilitator and also referred to process checkers and ground rules. The following statement provides an explanation of how a process checker can keep the conversation focused.

Most of the time somebody is assigned as a facilitator for some of those large debates and it's that person's responsibility to help move things along. I think if somebody is using a formal process, we do in a lot of environments at the outset of a group's task, assign ground rules for the group so that helps. We'll also assign roles within the group, so you might have somebody be what we call a process checker, which is when the conversation is being derailed and is no longer addressing the issue at hand, somebody has the ability to kind of call out or call attention to the group that we're veering off target and kind of say like 'Process check. Where are we going with this part of the conversation,' and kind of reel people back in. There are sometimes timekeepers assigned so we're gonna allow 15 minutes to debate this issue and at the end of the 15 minutes the person kind of says like time's up. I think when those things are in play, so there's a set of ground rules that everybody understands, there's somebody paying attention to when we're veering far off track or discussing things that may not really be centrally relevant or we're under time constraints, that things become less personal. But I can't say that every group adheres to those kind of perhaps best practices.

(Interviewee 28, personal communication, March, 2018)

The organization described below also has methods to move a conversation to a conclusion. Specific phrases are used to pause a conversation, postpone it, or move it to a decision.

Let's consider a rat hole, right? Are we down a rat hole and is there any cheese down the rat hole? One metaphor, right? So should we keep digging until we find something or are we literally just digging for no purpose and therefore, we stop. A more…you know, I'll pick an appropriate metaphor we use is “the conversation is peaking.” So anyone around the table we can use the symbol of their hands bringing their fingers together like a church steeple type of thing to make that point. And you say, "Guys, I think we've peaked, folks, I think we've peaked on this topic, let's move on," or, "Let's get back to the subject," or, "Let's make a decision and we'll go forward. Let's agree to decide later," or you cut off the debate and it ceases to be productive. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018)
The following participant’s organization goes a step further and uses tools to limit the
time any one individual speaks on a topic, and they take a break when the discussion is unproductive.

We type yellow cards where you just raise the yellow card and call it a break. We've done actual timeouts where somebody jumps in and says, "I'm actually calling a timeout." We've done another thing which is an indirect timeout which is where we've actually given everyone in the meeting two poker chips and you can only speak two times over that topic we're talking about. So that's kind of a way to call a timeout where if somebody's placed their last poker chip and they're still getting a little crazy, somebody will call them out, be like, "Dude, you played your chips." Like, you're in a personal timeout. That takes off of Liz Wiseman's research on multipliers if you don't know her work which I highly recommend. It's pretty awesome. But her technique is, you know, playing to your chips. But, yes, that's the way to put somebody in an individual timeout as opposed to a group timeout. (Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018)

The data indicate that there are a wide range of practices with respect to focusing conversations and moving them to a conclusion. Some organizations have no set process, whereas others go so far as to provide a certain number of chips to prevent a group member from dominating the conversation.

**Other Influencers of Dissent Expression**

**Cost and Time Pressure**

Although participants commented on the value of decision-making processes, several participants mentioned that cost pressure or time pressure can be a barrier to the effectiveness of decision-making processes. Pressures of this nature can take leaders off course, and the organizational process is shortened or abandoned. One participant described such an experience with cost pressure:

I think there was a short-term objective to take costs out in a major way and that led to sub optimal decision making that did not contemplate all of the risks that would be involved in taking those two courses of action. And probably insufficient due diligence was done on the part of management as to the supplier's
capability to fulfill their contractual obligations. (Interviewee 25, personal communication, March, 2018)

Another participant explained that deadlines or time pressure can influence how the process is followed:

Sometimes, there are X, you know, deviates or factors that need us to make a decision by a certain point in time. And then it might be this, "You know what, cancel everything else you have and we're not leaving here until we come to a decision." (Interviewee 31, personal communication, March, 2018)

Sometimes those time pressures are a result of our inability to make a decision. Right? Let's get to a point because we've deferred it so much that now it becomes a time pressure. (Interviewee 20, personal communication, February, 2018)

Therefore, an organization may have fully developed processes to obtain dissent and make decisions; however, these processes may not be followed when there are time or cost pressures.

In summary, organizations in the study use a variety of practices or models to make decisions. Some of these practices provide multiple opportunities for employee input and dissent along the path to decision making. When followed, decision-making models can be effective in obtaining employee opinions, concerns and thoroughly analyzing courses of action.

**Interviewee and Organizational Views about Dissent**

Aside from information about organizational practices, the data also brought to light variations in interviewee perceptions about dissent and indicate that participants and organizations are often conflicted about dissent. These data will be reviewed in this section to provide a context for understanding the findings discussed in Chapter 5.

Participant perceptions about dissent were not specifically addressed in the interviews. However, there was one question related to the meaning of the terms dissent, debate, and
conflict at the end of the interview. It is notable that there were themes with regard to participant perceptions about various aspects of dissent. The first theme is that a majority of interviewees appear to be conflicted about dissent based on statements made about dissent. The second theme is the paradox of organizations valuing both dissent and diplomacy. The third theme is that participants mentioned the time it takes to listen to and consider dissent. There are differences in whether participants think that it is worth the time to consider dissent. Finally, there were patterns with respect to how participants view the terms debate, conflict, and dissent. These four themes will be explored in this section.

**Interviewee Conflicted about Dissent.** Interviewees, as leaders, were at times conflicted about dissent and made statements demonstrating this. For example, one participant stated, “I like dissent. Nobody likes it. What I like about it, I like that it's a reflection of trust and buy-in” (Interviewee 8, personal communication, February, 2018). Another interviewee commented, “The leaders appreciate opinions, but don’t always take action. Leaders don’t always seek out – hope that we don’t get them” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, February, 2018). The difficult nature of listening is expressed by this interviewee: “Our CEO is very open…You could tell he doesn't like it, but he will listen to it. I would say some of the middle level managers are not comfortable with this, and they may reject the information” (Interviewee 34, personal communication, March, 2018). These quotes indicate that there is a clear value to the expression of dissent, but it can be challenging for leaders to hear this dissent.
The Dissent Paradox. Furthermore, a paradox emerged in terms of how organizations handle dissent. Although leaders who dissent are valued, diplomacy is also valued. Participants describe this as a fine line or balance.

They're a hero (according to their peers) if they were brave enough to step out. I'll be candid, sometimes in our senior leadership meetings people can be seen as a whiner or squeaky wheel, being disruptive rather than constructive, being dissonant. And I think it's best expressed for my own self as a leader when I say, 'Bring me solutions, don't just bring me a complaint.' So I think those that at least attempt to do that are received better than those that are just folding their arms and stomping their foot. (Interviewee 8, personal communication, February, 2018)

This fine balance almost seems like a no-win at times. Within a particular organization, one has to dissent in just the right way, not too little and not too much, as illustrated in this participant’s statement:

I definitely think from a positive perspective in our organization, if you're somebody who speaks up and is willing to dissent and is willing to throw out a different opinion, it elevates your position in the organization. Now it's a fine line. If you become argumentative, then all of a sudden it backfires, people look at you as argumentative. So if you voice your debate and you show that you have an opinion and that you stand by your opinion, it improves your authority and your power and your influence up to a point, and if you cross it, then people say 'well, you know, they always argue, they're always disagreeing.' So if you debate the appropriate amount it can be critical to establishing your position in the hierarchy, but if you do it too little or too much, then it can be counterproductive. (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018)

In the above examples, dissent is valued as long as it is delivered in just the right way. The paradox lies in the contradiction between the value placed on dissent and diplomacy simultaneously, as indicated in the above quotes.

Although employees may receive mixed messages regarding dissent, some organizations lean toward or away from dissent expression. In the following statement, this participant suggests that employees learn the importance of politics and filtering dissent.
But then at the individual level, I would say it's much different, right, because at the organizational level, typically, you have seasoned managers, right, that know the values of the company, they can play the political game, and they are also service-focused. You know, they're gonna do what needs to be done, trust each other. But at the lower levels, right, you have people at different stages of their career, different stages of personal maturity, professional maturity, and so it's a much more fluid environment in terms of the different ways people share dissent or give feedback, right? Meaning you may not know any better and you have been burned a few times, and you voice your concerns, and you get feedback from your manager, "Well, that wasn't the appropriate way." And then you have a mix of managers that are learn..., young managers that are learning to manage that...really wanna make a name for themselves. So they're just gonna voice things to anybody that'll listen. Right, they don't have that management filter yet. (Interviewee 36, personal communication, March, 2018)

Whereas learning how to filter dissent is important in the above organization, speaking up is valued in other organizations: “When I look at the up and comers and pick who's gonna be the next officer of the company, it's those people that do speak up” (Interviewee 19, personal communication, February, 2018). Thus, the dissent paradox is evident within organizations and can also be observed in the differences in the data among organizations.

**Perception of Whether Time to Listen to Dissent is Worth It.** Participants shared an understanding that it is time consuming to solicit and consider dissent. They do not, however, all agree that the time is worth the effort. Some participants clearly stated that the extra time it takes to consider dissent is worth the time.

I happen to be in a part of the organization where my leader stresses over-communication. He'd rather hear more and more often than not. And there's a downside to that. Sometimes we're spending so much time communicating and sharing and collaborating that we struggle to get our work done sometimes. But, I think I would rather have that than not. (Interviewee 29, personal communication, March, 2018)

Because again, consensus-driven, someone always ends up being devil's advocate. I think we're good, there. Which, of course, you could be devil's advocate and you throw the whole thing off...you don't have a good reason for it, you just want to
present the other side…I think it's probably a good thing. Because we do all the
due diligence up front, it just takes us longer. (Interviewee 32, personal
communication, March, 2018)

It's much more time consuming, but I think in the long run will be much more
representative of a more holistic view so we can make a better decision.
(Interviewee 20, personal communication, February, 2018)

Other participants were frustrated with how long debate can take and are more conflicted
about whether the process is worth the time.

But at the early stages it's a tenuous time because people's patience can wear thin
because you're not necessarily driving specifically toward results right out of the
gate and meetings tend to—If the meeting’s original agenda was three hours in
duration, you find out that it's four and a half hours long, people are still going
and you only got through half of the agenda. (Interviewee 24, personal
communication, February, 2018)

“So, where I came from was more of hierarchical, so top-down. A little easier.
You don't always agree with the decisions but that was the decision, you went
with it. But, here, it takes weeks and weeks.”(Interviewee 32, personal
communication, March, 2018)

Although the majority of participants indicated that the time it takes to consider dissent is
worth it because of effective outcomes, a few shared frustration with the time taken up by
debates and the process of considering multiple perspectives.

**Reluctance to report.** Several participants showed a reluctance to report on
organizational dissent in the interviews. This was either stated directly or implied from
indirect responses to a question. In the middle of their interviews, a few participants
confirmed that the recording would be erased and that quotes would be de-identified.
This often occurred when participants were asked about their observations of the CEO
and top leaders’ reaction to dissent. To protect these participants, their specific concerns
and quotes will not be shared here. However, the reluctance illustrates the earlier point
about safety and risk taking with regard to dissent expression.
How Terms are Viewed. At the end of the interview, participants were asked: When you think about the terms dissent, conflict, and debate, do you think about them as similar constructs or do the terms have very different meanings to you? Interviewees answered this question by summarizing what each term means to them. Although most participants alluded to the value of dissent during the interview, the majority of participants viewed dissent as a negative term, and some had particularly strong language to describe dissent. Most also viewed conflict as a negative term, but they viewed debate more positively. The quantity of responses that included a negative perception of dissent or conflict is notable.

View Dissent As Negative Term:

“Debate is healthy, conflict is healthy if handled well, dissent is paralyzing” (Interviewee 26, personal communication, March, 2018)

“Conflict and debate are constructive and good. Dissent, I do view dissent as more negative energy, I guess, where the other two I would view as more positive energy” (Interviewee 13, personal communication, February, 2018)

Conflict is the outlier to me because that's a very emotional word. Debate doesn't bother me, I do that all day long. Dissent is almost a scary word. That implies that you're actually going against someone who can hurt you somehow. (Interviewee 3, personal communication, March, 2018)

So I look at debate and dissent as very similar. One's positive and one's negative. Dissent to me is negative, like, it feels more personal. It feels that word...I feel like I will debate alternatives that, you know, we're trying to reach a conclusion. Dissent feels, like, I'm going to debate, like, things that are contrary to my belief. So dissent feels like it's personal and I'm dissenting because you're challenging or the decision challenges my beliefs. Debate is, you know, we're just working towards different options and, you know, I can have feelings one way or the other, but, you know, it doesn't feel, like, it challenges a belief of mine. And in conflict...there's two people in conflict or I have a conflict with this priority or decision, but I'm going to do something about it when I debate or I dissent. (Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018)
...Conflict is the worst. If I were to rank them, debate does not cause any blood pressure change other than a mild rise, and that's probably more of a competitive rise than anything else. A spirited debate is something I can walk away from and not take personally or I'm a lot more likely to not take it personally. Dissent I'll take personally and conflict I'll absolutely take personally. (Interviewee 23, personal communication, March, 2018)

Like so dissent and conflict, my initial reaction to those terms are more negative than productive...I view debate as productive...You know, I always try to turn conflict into something positive because I think more around conflict and debate have similar constructs, I guess, you know, even though I think my initial reaction around conflict is bad...I do think that, you know, conflict and debate are constructive and good. Dissent, I do view dissent as more negative energy, I guess, where the other two I would view as more positive energy. (Interviewee 20, personal communication, February, 2018)

I think for me, conflict may be the glue between debate and dissent. Meaning in a debate, right, you're debating two different viewpoints, let's say, or multiple viewpoints and there's multiple people on the debate, and that can lead to conflict, right, animosity or grievances, which then builds a culture where people dissent, right? Because they weren't heard, you know, over time... I think dissent, to me, seems to be more, maybe, I guess, cultural. I don't know. Dissent is just like it has a negative tone to me. When somebody is dissenting. Whereas if you are debating, you're debating as equals. Dissent, somebody is ostracized. And conflict, you don't know, you know, whether you're equals or ostracized because you're busy fighting. Conflict is like...it's uncontrolled. (Interviewee 36, personal communication, March, 2018)

Although interviewees acknowledged the value of dissent, most perceived dissent as a negative term. One participant even took out a phone during the interview and looked up synonyms for dissent to assist me by seeking a more positive term for dissent. Another interviewee understood the importance of conflict and the tendency to squash conflict. This participant wants to educate facilitators instead of choose a new term for dissent. To mitigate the tendency to avoid or kill conflict, the interviewee has a plan: “One of the things I'm looking at is bringing in the kind of killing conflict assessment this year in the organization in order to help people feel better or comfortable in a conflict situation” (Interviewee 34, personal communication, March, 2018).
A Comparison of Dissent in Two Organizations

This section includes a report on the data from two mini organizational case studies. Five leaders were interviewed from organization A and six from organization B. Both organizations are professional service organizations and serve global clients. Quotes from all 11 participants are included throughout this chapter. Some quotes, mentioned in earlier sections, are repeated in this section to support a point about the organization. For de-identification purposes, the quotes in this section are limited.

Overview of Organization A

Organization A is a professional services organization and is currently in the process of significant change. Part of the change involves purposefully seeking dissenting views at the leadership level. One of the practices it recently implemented is a core value that asks leaders to “Openly and Vigorously Debate” (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018). Decisions were previously made by a small group of top leaders, and dissent was not expressed regularly by employees and leaders in the organization. “I think a majority are probably reluctant. There are legacy, political tones in the organization that probably make people feel uncomfortable to do that” (Interviewee 17, personal communication, February, 2018). Although there were pockets of dissent expression in certain areas depending on the leader of that unit, there was not a culture of seeking and acting on dissent. Top leaders would often go along with a decision but not act in support of the decision after the fact. “So people in the meetings would say ‘okay, great, I agree, I'll do it, whatever,’ and then they would go off and they wouldn't live up to the values that they had described or said that they would follow” (Interviewee 12,
personal communication, February, 2018). There is a new emphasis in the organization to voice concerns early and to support the decision after it is made.

The organization gathers and analyzes data when making decisions. It also discusses risks for large decisions, particularly if the decision has major financial implications. For example, when the organization is deciding whether to bring a new partner on board, they project scenarios, such as what would happen if that partnership dissolves three years from now (Interviewee 17, personal communication, February, 2018). Another practice used at times is to predict the perspective of stakeholders.

Yes. I mean definitely within our innovation process and within our investment decision process we try to seek out multiple different perspectives and different people that have subject matter expertise to make sure that we get different opinions and different takes on it. (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018)

When it comes to arriving at a decision, organization A sometimes has difficulty with arriving at a consensus.

We prefer to end up with a consensus, but definitely many of the decisions are not. And we try to evaluate, try to use whatever our objectives are for the year or the quarter as the measuring stick. So we have some we're evaluating this decision versus what we all agreed we're gonna try to do and use that as the criteria. (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018)

Although organization A has some decision-making practices, they are not formalized and are generally used for larger, more significant decisions. The benefit of this is that the organization has been able to quickly take advantage of growth opportunities and does not get bogged down in decision making. The downside of this, historically, is that there is not always alignment and commitment from all when a decision is made.

Furthermore, the influences of power and hierarchy described by the majority of participants across industries in the study is a factor in the expression of dissent in this
organization. New leadership intends to change this, and they are currently focused on obtaining dissent from leaders. Despite the lack of formal practices to obtain input, there are many talented leaders in the organization and examples of when dissent led to an effective decision. This organization is a good example of an organization that has a low level of dissent expression overall but has been able to successfully grow and innovate. This may be due in part to the dissent that is occurring in certain pockets of the organization where leadership is open to alternative viewpoints. The skill of high level leaders in the organization may also contribute to this interesting phenomenon. The push for a culture change and increased expression of dissent in this organization may be coming just at the right time because the current approach may not be sustainable with the growth of the organization.

**Overview of Organization B**

Organization B is also a professional services organization with a long history of dissent encouragement. It is a consensus driven organization that spends a great deal of time obtaining the perspectives of all defined stakeholders through one-on-one meetings. One interviewee provided an example of this:

I just spoke to the 16 practice leaders on a specific topic, and I had only eight who agreed with the proposal and eight who didn't. In that case, it required further discussion … it never happens that the decision is made out of nowhere and you discover it. "Oh, that's new.” (Interviewee 27, personal communication, February, 2018)

The accounts from interviewees reveal that the organization is unique in that it consistently obtains feedback and processes it. No other participants reported that decision-making processes produced an environment of no surprises in their
organizations. Interviewees from organization B believe the culture of seeking input and speaking up derives from the organization’s team consulting practices.

I think our culture is very much driven by the way the consulting case teams work together. But there is one central piece of them working together, which is the case team meeting, CTM. And this is actually where the different members of the team bring their analysis together and, you know, work on their strategies and on the overall wanting of the project. And in that setup, it's really encouraged that you do speak up, because you really want to come to the right conclusions. (Interviewee 30, personal communication, March, 2018)

“It's kind of unique and it can be sometimes very time consuming,” (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018) but this is how the organization has always worked. Because challenging the hypothesis is expected in team case meetings for clients, this culture of challenge carries over to the internal organization (Interviewee 15, personal communication, February, 2018). Employees and consultants are comfortable expressing views and feel heard by the organization.

The difficulty in obtaining so much input is that it takes a very long time to make even small decisions in this organization. Leaders are not sure that the method of obtaining extensive input from so many people is sustainable as the organization grows. Most leaders, however, believe that the time it takes to listen to and process dissent is worthwhile. “I think it's probably a good thing. Because we do all the due diligence up front, it just takes us longer” (Interviewee 32, personal communication, March, 2018). It can sometimes be difficult for new people who did not grow up in the organization, because decisions take a long time and the process for obtaining input is not hierarchical as it is in many organizations (Interviewee 15, personal communication, February, 2018).

The organization has a core value that encourages employee expression, but four out of five participants from the organization did not mention the core value and instead
emphasized the history of the organization, its culture or DNA, and the consensus driven and non-hierarchical practices. The core value is “… all about being professional, being ethical and that contains something about speaking up” (Interviewee 27, personal communication, February, 2018). Therefore, there is language in the core value about speaking up, but it is not prominent and something employees refer to all the time. The culture, however, drives people to speak up.

Organization B has extensive formal decision-making methods in addition to informal methods of seeking input.

So, the first thing is to diagnose, understand the context, look at the data, diagnose what is working, what is not working. Then the second step is to think about the options and for each option, understand what are the advantages, what are the disadvantages, who would be in favor of option one. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, March, 2018)

Although it is often difficult to bring debates to a conclusion in this organization, employees are involved in and generally pleased with results of the decision-making process. What is absent from organization B’s practices are town hall meetings or contests. A great deal of input is gathered, however, through one-on-ones with stakeholders and through case team meetings. This is an example of where an organization has a high level of dissent expression, but it does not use all of the formal practices used by other organizations with a high level of dissent. This organization is an outlier in that it has over 15,000 employees and it has been able to sustain growth while seeking dissent and engaging employees and consultants at all levels in decision making. No other organization of any size in the study spends so much time obtaining input in one-on-one discussions or small group meetings.
Comparison of Organizations A and B

Organization B has a long history and culture of challenge and debate, whereas organization A has a history of agreement or going along with the top leader’s decision. Organization B effectively draws out dissent through formal and informal practices, whereas organization A has few practices to solicit and process dissent. Organization A is in the process of change and is intentionally discussing debate and the need to hear dissent. Interviewees from organization B agreed on the processes the organization uses for decision making. The interviewees from organization A, at times, reported different perspectives with regard to decision-making practices. For example, one participant mentioned that multiple options were considered when making a decision, whereas the other interviewees from the same organization did not have the same perspective.

Participants from both organizations were able to cite examples of how dissent positively influenced decision outcomes. Organization B seeks dissent and related outcomes on a regular basis for large and small decisions. The organization also obtains dissent from all levels and generations in the organization. Organization A primarily emphasizes dissent at the top levels of the organization and hopes to see a higher level of dissent based on the new leadership value and emphasis on debate.

Organization B has many practices to bring about dissent, and participants observe more dissent in this organization compared to organization A. Finally, both organizations have examples of when dissent brought about positive results for the organization, but organization B sees these outcomes more often due to a long history and
culture of dissent in addition to consistent and well-developed practices to solicit employee views.

**Conclusion**

The goal of Chapter 4 was to report study results and indicate themes and information gleaned directly from the interviews. The chapter provided background on the inductive and deductive coding processes. This chapter also included a report on data from two mini organizational case studies. The data was explained by code category, but was not interpreted. The data revealed factors that influence the expression of dissent and decision-making practices that allow for dissent. A summary of findings and implications of those findings will be presented in Chapter 5. The findings section will highlight organizational practices employed by organizations that stand out as having a high level of dissent encouragement as reported by interviewees. The findings will also detail examples of organizational decisions influenced by dissent and associated outcomes. Finally, the meaning of the data in relation to research and practice will be explored in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Analysis of Results and Implications

This chapter will discuss the meaning of the findings that were reported in Chapter 4. Additionally, a revised conceptual model will be discussed. Finally, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research and practice will be explored in this chapter.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What practices or models do organizations employ to solicit and consider dissent in organizational decision making? Organizations employee a wide range of practices. In organizations that obtain dissent that makes a difference, leaders spend a lot of time and resources seeking views. Therefore, it is not one specific practice or set of practices that lead to success in soliciting and considering dissent. Rather, it is a genuine interest in hearing employee views demonstrated through action that separates one organization from another.

History, culture, and leadership are significant influencers in whether employees will dissent in an organization based on the sample in this study, but organizational practices are necessary to bring about dissent. Power and consequences are barriers to effective dissent and can be mitigated through dissent-encouraging practices. Effective practices can be informal, such as having individual meetings with many stakeholders to draw out ideas. The data also indicate that the use of more formal decision-making practices provides an avenue for dissent. Venues for employee dissent, from blogs with the CEO to large town hall meetings, can be effective if dissent is considered and actions
are taken as a result of dissent. See Table 8 for a complete list of practices mentioned by participants.

Table 8. Organizational Practices to Solicit and Consider Dissent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices to Solicit and Consider Dissent (discussed by participants)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corporate Philosophy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish and Publish Core Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modes of Communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Meetings to Obtain Input from Stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Case Meetings/Calls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct Communication with CEO or Top Leaders (Calls, email, blogs)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Events to Seek Input</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Contests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Hall Meetings/Calls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanisms to Enhance Decision-Making Discussions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting Facilitation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assign Roles to Group Members for Important Decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Checker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Process Checker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sponsors for Options</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure all Views are Heard</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Allow Time for Debate</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tools to Focus Debates</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steeples/Phrases (going down rat hole)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chips or Yellow Cards to limit comments by one individual</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Decision-Making Processes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate and Evaluate Multiple Options for Key Decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Methods to Keep Debates Task Oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gather Data and compare options based on data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyze Decision from Perspective of Key Stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluate how a Proposed Action Could Fail—What Would Have to be True</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The organizations in this study that stand out for soliciting and considering dissent have widespread mechanisms to obtain employees’ views (See Table 9). They attempt to involve employees at the lower levels of the organization in addition to involving the leaders of the organization. These organizations also invest time in soliciting input, and

Table 9. Organizations in the Sample with High Dissent Expression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Technology</td>
<td>Weekly Town Hall Meetings for Thousands</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dissent from all Levels is Encouraged and Actions are Taken</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Healthcare</td>
<td>Innovation Challenge (contest)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Email Access to the President</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular Employee Surveys and Action Plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Healthcare</td>
<td>Employee Contests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Email Access to the President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular Employee Surveys and Action Plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Professional Services</td>
<td>Team Meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Core Value</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) Professional Services</td>
<td>Team Case Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular Meetings with Stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision-Making Practices - Data analysis, multiple options, risks,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>stakeholder perspective, consensus</td>
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<td>Core Value</td>
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this sends a message to employees that they value input. Moreover, they make changes based on the dissent, which also demonstrates that the desire for input is genuine.

In addition to organizations that scored high with respect to dissent expression overall, two organizations stand out for their use of advanced methods and tools for encouraging debate, managing conflict, and bringing conversations to a conclusion (Table 10). The data is unclear about whether the organizations referenced in Table 10 have strategies to encourage dissent at all levels or whether these tools are primarily used at the top levels of the organization. However, the methods mentioned stand out as developed strategies that lead to innovation and mistake avoidance.

Table 10. Developed Methods for Facilitation of Debate and Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services Organization</td>
<td>Tools to Manage Group Contribution and Conflict - Chips, Yellow Cards, Bonding Breaks, CEO presents last</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would have to be true versus devil’s advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Organization</td>
<td>Methods to move debate to a conclusion - phrases and symbols to keep the group on track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time and process checkers, sponsors of viewpoints</td>
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<td>Core Value</td>
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When an organization takes a massive amount of time and money to hold weekly “all hands” meetings with one or two thousand people in the room and broadcast it across the entire company of sixty to seventy thousand employees, it sees results in terms of
hearing dissent (Interviewee 40, personal communication, June, 2018). Similarly, when an organization holds a contest, invests time in evaluating presentations, and rewards employees for innovative solutions, they send a clear message about the value of employee input (refer to pages 83 and 84). These actions can be contrasted with the organization that creates a core value statement but does not have practices or venues to hear and respond to input. Because the data reveal that psychological safety is an important factor in the expression of dissent, practices and results are necessary to bring forth employee ideas in a safe environment.

Research Question 2

Research question 2: How do practices that encourage dissent influence organizational decision making? The data indicate that practices that encourage dissent can lead to innovative decisions as well as decisions that avoid important organizational mistakes. Conversely, mistakes are often made when organizations do not use practices to seek input. Participants provided 18 examples of dissent that positively influenced decision making. In the following sample of decision examples, dissent led to a positive business outcome.

Innovative Product or Service. In the first example, one employee pushed for an unpopular decision that led to business success. The second example is similar in that one person pushed for something new that the company had never done before when it was unclear whether the idea would be profitable. The final example involved a group of employees boldly making a case to provide products and services to a smaller market.
**New Technology:**

Let's call him "Joe..." And [our employee] saw something unique there, and said, "Guys, there's something here." And he pushed forward. Anytime that we were going down a path and we said, "But this other organization had this relationship with this established platform. And, you know, Joe's platform isn't as mature. It's too volatile. It's too this. It's too that." And he would say, "No, it has these features and it's leading edge, and this is what our customers want." And the whole way we were saying, "No, no. You know, can't do that." And I'm telling you, this guy pushed through. Pushed through to the point where we ended up learning so much more...So collectively as an organization, we probably got better by a year's worth of trial and error by just this guy's dissenting view and pushing it forward. And it made us so much better.... (Interviewee 20, personal communication, February, 2018)

**New Service:**

...To develop a women’s leadership initiative that we wouldn't take to clients, that it would be completely different than something we'd done before, we're building leader capabilities in clients. It would be something where it's an enrollment-based program. We don't do enrollment or anything like that... But it was an experiment that actually I wanted to run with a couple of consultants and a couple of key partners. And I thought, you know, "Hey, this could be a $2 million revenue stream plus if we do it right and make the business case." But it was foreign, completely foreign business model. We've never done anything like this. (Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018).

**Change in Market:**

During a recent reorganization and a debate about deploying resources across a series of countries, there was a big debate around how many countries to cover ...And would we be better served doing a more complete, better, robust job in a smaller set of countries spread through versus too thin? And, you know, the majority of the opinion going into the debate was, "Oh, you can't pull out of a market, you can't turn your back on a market, you can't, you know, you can't retrench, you have to keep this footprint unless...if you leave a void, your competition will fill it. That was the prevailing opinion. But, in fact we were using facts around where the heart of our business really comes from. We were able to target, make a decision to target far fewer countries, and yet not expose dissidents. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018).

**Mistake Avoided.** Innovation is one way that dissent influenced decision outcomes. Participants also provided examples of when mistakes were avoided because
of dissent by one or more employees. In the following examples, proposed courses of action were reversed based on dissent. Both examples involve ideas that were well developed before the dissent occurred.

**Proposed Product:**

There's a very public decision that just came out yesterday where a group of the employees have been quite vocal about the company's working with governmental organizations on a product. They were quite vocal and critical of it. And then the company just decided to end the contract with the government for the specific project. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, March, 2018)

**Proposed Change in Work/Travel Schedule:**

Yes. I mean, that happens all the time. I can give you an example. We had a very eager global team who wanted to move us ahead on our, you know...have a better work/life balance for our consultants because that's a big issue...and they had developed the concept without consulting a lot of people. They wanted to be quick. And they said, "Well, rather than being with the clients for four days, why don't we make a new norm and encourage people to only be three days a week at the client and spend another night at home," which is really nice for the people. They do that a lot. "And you know, it will increase life quality." The people from Asia, they were just laughing at this, because they said, "Well, our focus is not to get them three days to the clients. We want them not to fly out to the clients Sunday evening and coming back Saturday," right? "We'd be really happy if they had four days at the client, that would be a huge improvement," right? So we realized the concept that was developed was probably for the American market, for part of Europe...or a larger part of Europe. But for AP it was totally not appropriate. (Interviewee 30, personal communication, March, 2018)

Although participant accounts indicate the difficulty of reversing a proposed decision, the above examples show that dissent can influence decision outcomes and contribute to the avoidance of major organizational mistakes. There are times when dissent is heard and considered, but the organization proceeds with the course of action. The process of considering dissent may still be valuable, according to participants, because future decisions may take the dissent into account.
Decision Reversed Quickly. Four participants shared examples of times when a thorough decision-making process that brought out opposition did not influence an initial decision. However, when it was clear that the first decision was not producing the intended outcome, the organization was able to pivot quickly and go with an alternate decision because dissent and a viable alternative had been previously discussed as part of the decision-making process.

Pay Frequency:

So, we were setting up our own nurse agency through the organization and we were having kind of a debate as to how we could really hire nurses that have kind of a competitive advantage over possibilities, things that we could do differently that would be attractive to new hires. So, one of them came up with next day pay option. So, I work today, I get paid tomorrow. And so people would go back to their shifts, you know, especially like, around holiday time to give it. So we were kind of having a debate whether we go with this next day or …twice a month…. So we ended up going with the next day pay one. But then about six months later we ended up, the other company was able to do something very similar at a lower cost, so then we ended up switching. So, it's good we had the debate because we were looking at both. We still went with one decision, but then we were able to move to the other decision later. And everybody felt good about that. (Interviewee 34, personal communication, March, 2018)

Product Defect:

We had a very public product quality, product reliability problem. And it wasn't until this company listened to the dissenting voice which initially the company refused to accept the fact that the defect or the quality problem, or the liability problem was significant. There was denial around, okay, it's just the thing doesn't work like it's supposed to, we agreed with that, but the result of that is not material, right? So, it's a significant error. It wasn't until the company decided to listen to the dissenting opinions of the company that, "Hey, guys, wait a second. Any error is significant. Wrong is wrong, we need to go fix this thing." And it really was a seminal moment for the company. It was a turning point for the company in the public's eye, in our customers' eye when we publicly disclosed it. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018)

The value of decision-making processes to solicit and consider dissent is evident in the data. Participants perceive that more effective decisions are made when dissent is
considered and well developed decision-making practices are used. These decisions lead to innovation and avoidance of mistakes. When dissent is shared, but not listened to, it is still valuable in that participants feel heard and the dissent may be considered at a future time. This is effective only if dissent is acted on when appropriate.

Organizations employ practices to solicit and consider dissent. Although some organizations have more developed practices than others, the result of considering dissent is more effective organizational decisions that lead to innovation (Interviewee 20, personal communication, February, 2018; Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018; Interviewee 33, personal communication, March, 2018) and the avoidance of mistakes (Interviewee 40, personal communication, March, 2018; Interviewee 30, personal communication, March, 2018).

Revised Conceptual Model

The findings indicate that organizations employ a wide range of practices to solicit and consider employee views. These practices can be effective in obtaining employee dissent. There are many influencers in the expression of dissent in addition to whether there are organizational practices to encourage dissent (See Figure 3). How dissent works in organizations is more complex than indicated in the conceptual framework shown in Chapter 1. The history, culture, and leader behavior in an organization play a key role in how and whether dissent will be expressed. These factors often act as a filter for what is expressed by employees. When there is a sincere desire to obtain employee input, however, practices can mitigate these factors and influence
Figure 3. Revised Model of Organizational Dissent Expression

whether dissent is expressed. For practices to be effective, employees need to observe that dissent is heard and considered and that dissent sometimes changes a course of action. Effective decision-making practices can positively influence dissent expression and promote a process through which many views are considered after dissent is expressed. Such a process can lead to the future expression of dissent because employees witness the safe expression of views and associated actions. When dissent is withheld because of real or perceived consequences, it is much less likely to occur in the future.
Thus, decision outcomes are negatively influenced in that important views are not shared. When dissent is expressed, decisions are positively influenced in terms of mistake avoidance and innovation. Even when dissent is heard, but not heeded, organizations may benefit from the dissent if a quick change in a decision is later necessary.

Maintaining consistent practices to encourage, consider, and act on dissent is time consuming and expensive. Whether an organization has a culture of individual meetings with stakeholders, the CEO responding to employee concerns via email, or regular town hall meetings, these practices require an investment of resources and a commitment to ongoing efforts. Organizations need to believe that the benefits of obtaining employee views is worth the investment of time and effort.

**Dissent Ambivalence**

As described in Chapter 4, the data revealed that interviewees are conflicted about dissent. Leaders sometimes said that they want to hear dissent and do not want to hear dissent in the same sentence or paragraph. Furthermore, many comments were made about the importance of dissenting properly. Participants described a fine line in being confident to express a view but not crossing the line and becoming disagreeable: “So if you debate the appropriate amount, it can be critical to establishing your position in the hierarchy, but if you do it too little or too much, then it can be counterproductive” (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018). This quote typifies the views of interviewees and perhaps the reality of what leads to success in many organizations today. The competencies that are evaluated on many highly regarded leadership assessments support this view. For example, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)’s
research-based *Manager Benchmarks* (2014) rates factors related to the manager’s expression of views and encouragement of others’ views. Examples of leadership competencies from this assessment include:

- **Strategic Perspective**
  Works effectively with higher management (e.g., presents to them, persuades them, and stands up to them if necessary)

- **Change Management**
  Takes into account peoples' concerns during change.
  Is straightforward with individuals about consequences of an expected action or decision.

- **Participative Management**
  Is open to the input of others
  Encourages direct reports to share.
  Listens to individuals at all levels in the organization (*Manager Benchmarks*, 2014).

In addition to competencies on dissent expression, the manager assessment also includes factors on manager or direct report diplomacy:

- **Confronting Problem Employees**
  Can deal effectively with resistant employees

- **Building Collaborative Relationships**
  Uses good timing and common sense in negotiating; makes his/her points when the time is ripe and does it diplomatically.

- **Composure**
  Contributes more to solving organizational problems than to complaining about them.

- **Difficulty Changing or Adapting**
  Is unprofessional about his/her disagreement with upper management (*Manager Benchmarks*, 2014).
Based on the competencies assessed in CCL’s *Manager Benchmarks* (2014), successful managers in organizations today, share their views carefully so that the timing and method of delivery is appropriate. Developing solutions should not sound like complaining. Thus, the balancing act required for successful dissent in organizations is evident. Is this a learnable skill that many top leaders possess? Or, does this present a no-win phenomenon for leaders and all employees? Disagreement, if delivered poorly, can stall a career. Aside from the chronic complainers or naysayers in an organization, how often do we see leaders or employees who fare well on all of these competencies? Are people in organizations generally too strong with their opinions or not strong enough? The factors used by the CCL’s *Manager Benchmarks* (2014) are based on many years of research with thousands of leaders and organizations. Interestingly, CCL’s *Executive Benchmarks* (2014) has many factors related to candor and expression of executive and others’ views. However, there are no factors related to diplomacy or timing with regard to sharing views. At the executive level, is it no longer important to be diplomatic or careful about the timing or delivery of dissent? Perhaps only those who are already proficient at the diplomatic expression of dissent make it to the executive level. I believe the answer is closer to the former in that executive teams may be more permissive of debate and dissent, as indicated in the data. It is also possible that organizations are conflicted about the behaviors they desire. This question can be considered in future research.

Closely associated with this dissent paradox is the negativity associated with the terms dissent and conflict. Although we need dissent in organizations and society to
correct mistakes, innovate, and improve, the data indicate that dissent has a negative connotation by most of those interviewed. One interviewee mentioned that “Usually…dissent is the losing argument; in the United States Supreme Court, the dissenting opinion is the one that lost” (Interviewee 13, personal communication, February, 2018). Several participants mentioned that they think of dissent as something that occurs after the decision is made. This thinking may derive from the idea of dissent in the context of the Supreme Court. Political dissent may be associated with everything from discourse and protests to civil disobedience and revolution. On the other hand, we honor those who are successful in peaceful dissent for the good of others or the world. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela represent such positive dissent. The dissent paradox then may begin with history and politics, and what we see in organizations is influenced by this societal paradox. Therefore, practitioners have their work cut out for them when it comes to organizational dissent. If dissent is truly valued, it will be important to address mixed messages regarding dissent in addition to implementing practices to encourage dissent. The expression of properly timed dissent delivered in an effective manner also needs to be attainable and taught to employees.

**Core Values and Corporate Philosophies**

As stated in Chapter 4, the data revealed that more than half of the study participants mentioned an organizational core value associated with the expression of dissent. However, there was not a clear connection between the existence of a core value and the level of dissent expression in organizations. Core values can make a difference in the expression of dissent only if there are practices in place to back up the value. What
mattered more than the core value to participants was a sincere interest in hearing employee views and the existence of practices to draw out and consider views. It takes time and resources to solicit and evaluate employee ideas and dissent. An organization shows that dissent is valued through dedication of the time and resources necessary to process dissent. One can imagine the challenge of holding weekly town hall meetings with thousands of employees. The cost alone of having top leaders and employees in those weekly meetings is exorbitant. The difficulty of hearing and processing weekly dissent is considered to be valuable and worth the time (Interviewee 40, personal communication, June, 2018). Likewise, organizing and evaluating ideas for an innovative challenge (Interviewee 28, personal communication, March, 2018) is quite time consuming. However, the ideas that solve organizational problems are so valuable that the time and money spent on such events are deemed worthwhile.

In my experience in working with organizations, even when top leaders find the opinions of frontline employees to be valuable, they often do not know how to obtain ideas from a large group of employees across many divisions and through many layers in the organization. A leader once said to me at my workplace, “I understand what you are saying, but I don’t know how to go about doing that,” in an honest response to a recommendation to obtain more input from those closest to the work. Therefore, the issue is not only valuing dissent and the time it takes to encourage and process views; leaders also need the knowledge of the best ways to tackle this, particularly in a large organization. The old “open door” policy is still espoused in many organizations, and it is just not enough when soliciting dissent. Instead of waiting for folks to come to the
leader’s door, leaders need to go out and solicit opinions as well as implement practices to evaluate and process ideas.

**Safety and Consequences**

The importance of practices to elicit dissent has been discussed. The data also indicate that, for practices to produce dissent on an ongoing basis, employees must feel safe and must believe that the expression of their views will not lead to negative consequences. Moreover, employees need to see evidence that dissent is considered and sometimes acted on for them to continue to express dissent. This is critical to the expression of dissent, and it was supported by the reluctance of several participants to share information about dissent and their need to be reassured about the confidentiality of interviews. Therefore, practices are important, but they will not be effective if employees observe that those who express dissent experience negative consequences or inaction.

It seems that an organizational culture that supports dissent instead of squelching it is a prerequisite for practices to produce the expression of dissent. Likewise, organizational leaders need to model dissent encouragement for practices to be effective. If an organization seeks out the views of stakeholders but is never influenced by the views and rarely takes action based on those views, the practice will not be effective in evoking ongoing dissent. Therefore, to reap the benefits of dissent and the resulting decision outcomes, dissent must be heard, considered, and acted upon when valuable.

**Confidence of Dissenter**

The results indicate that another antecedent of effective dissent expression is the confidence of the individual expressing dissent. Ten participants or 30 percent of those in
the study reported confidence as a factor that influences the expression of dissent. A total of 14 comments about confidence were made by participants. When all other conditions are favorable for dissent including the organizational culture, leader behavior, and safety, why do some individuals express dissent while others do not? Confidence is one factor according to the results. Confidence may be influenced by upbringing as stated by participant 28 (personal communication, March, 2018) when she reported that “I kind of learned from my parents that there's a time and a place to kind of show dissent and it wasn't necessarily that it could be all the time.” Confidence may also be influenced by national culture as described by Croucher et al. (2009). For example, a societal norm to defer to hierarchy or suppress dissent could be mistaken as lack of confidence. This idea of cultural influence will be discussed more in the next section of this chapter. Regardless of what factors influence one’s confidence, the data clearly indicates the importance of understanding it as a condition of dissent expression. The implications for assessing confidence during the hiring process and opportunities for training employees to express views with confidence will also be discussed further in the section of this chapter on implications for practice.

**Study Results and the Literature**

The study results confirm the literature that indicates that soliciting and considering dissent can lead to better decisions (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1972; Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Nutt, 1999; Roberto, 2013). Participants responded to the following question by providing 18 examples of decisions influenced by dissent: Can you think of a past decision that was influenced by a dissenting view (regardless of whether dissent was
listened to or not)? Of the 18 examples participants provided about decisions that were influenced by a dissenting view, all 18 decisions resulted in positive outcomes for the organization. The positive outcomes involved avoidance of a potential mistake or creation of an innovative product or service. No one mentioned that dissent led to a mistake. In fact, participants indicated that mistakes were made because dissent was not heard. One participant’s quote is representative of this sentiment: “I think the opposite happened. I don't think things were avoided or there were positive results from it, I think because dissenting voices weren't really acknowledged, or at least acted on, that a lot of mistakes did happen” (Interviewee 10, personal communication, February, 2018).

At times, participants had difficulty identifying when dissent influenced a decision: “I feel like we've had times, but now I'm trying to think of a specific example and I'm not coming up with one” (Interviewee 12, personal communication, February, 2018). There were no reported instances, however, where the influence of dissent result in a negative outcome. This is strong support for the literature and extends the literature in that the data provides specific accounts from leaders in organizations that show that dissent can 1) lead to innovation; 2) lead to avoidance of mistakes; and 3) lead to mistakes when it is absent, or not considered. Prior literature mentions the value of dissent, but few qualitative studies provide examples of organizational decisions resulting from dissent. The data confirm the influence of dissent on decision outcomes. The study also assessed methods of evoking dissent, such as whether organizations assign employees to the role of devil’s advocate when making decisions.
It has been over 40 years since Janis’s (1972) groupthink research and recommendation to assign a devil’s advocate for decisions, but the phenomenon of employees withholding views is still happening today, and this was evident in the data.

Sort of like everyone got onboard for a very, very slow-moving train wreck. They're seeing what's happening and they're noting it and they're waiting for someone else to respond to it but no one's getting off the train, like everyone's just sort of going along. And those that are getting off the train, they're not doing it by saying 'hey, everyone should go,' it's more like, 'okay, I just got another job.'  (Interviewee 10, personal communication, February, 2018)

The above quote could be mistaken for an official in the group that made the Bay of Pigs decision (Janis, 1972) or perhaps a former Kodak employee (Lucas & Goh, 2009). Based on the study sample, not much has changed with regard to dissent when there is not a culture that encourages dissent or one that employs processes to encourage the expression of dissent. Only three organizations in the study currently assign the role of devil’s advocate. The data revealed that organizations with a high level of dissent expression, instead, assign individuals to represent specific alternatives or stakeholder views in the decision-making process. Some organizations also look at the risks or downsides of each option, and this allows group members to share opposing views even though a devil’s advocate is not specifically assigned as part of the decision-making process.

Furthermore, many participants mentioned that there are enough devil’s advocates without assigning the role. The phrase “Let me play the devil’s advocate” is used frequently in organizations even if dissent is not widely encouraged or considered. The phrase has become acceptable and can be a less threatening way to share opposition according to study participants (refer to pages 87 to 90). However, Kelley (2005) refers to the downsides of this phrase and the potential to prevent innovations by squelching
ideas. One participant’s organization in the study balances the need for dissent with the risk of dampening interest in new ideas by refraining from devil’s advocacy in the early formulation of ideas (Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018). This firm also uses the phrase “what would have to be true” to support an idea instead of “let me play the devil’s advocate,” which may prematurely crush an idea.

Another prominent theme in the data relates to the influence of leader behavior on the expression of dissent. The study provided organizational examples of concepts described in the literature. Gandossy and Sonnenfeld (2005) recommend fostering a culture of open dissent in organizations. We see this culture play out through the descriptions of some of the study participants, particularly those who mentioned that a consensus culture was part of the organization’s DNA. The data also reveal that it does in fact make a difference when the CEO sets a tone and encourages feedback to identify and correct problems, as described by Gandossy and Sonnenfeld (2005). One study participant (Interviewee 40, personal communication, March, 2018) illustrated this point with a description of an organizational practice in which weekly town hall meetings are held with the CEO and other top leaders. Employees openly challenge processes and proposed decisions during those meetings. Similarly, Ward et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of top leaders surrounding themselves with a group of good critics. This study indicates that surrounding oneself with critics is not enough. To obtain ongoing dissent, ideas need to be considered, and people need to see that ideas are implemented when appropriate. Therefore, the study confirms the literature and extends it by providing organizational practices that encourage dissent. The findings also highlight that
consideration and action related to dissent are what bring about positive change for the organization and not the mere expression of dissent.

Processing dissent to ensure it is properly considered and implemented when appropriate requires advanced facilitation and decision-making processes. Effective decision-making practices consider multiple alternatives, surface and test assumptions, allow for dissenting views to emerge, consider views, and build consensus (Roberto, 2013; Heath & Heath, 2013). It is a fundamental challenge of leadership to be able to simultaneously bring about constructive conflict and build consensus (Roberto, 2013). The current research bears out the value of decision-making processes to bring forth positive outcomes for organizations. There were several examples of organizations that have well-developed decision-making practices. When a practice was abandoned in these organizations because of time or cost pressure, mistakes were sometimes made. These data underscore the importance of decision-making processes in soliciting and processing many points of view including dissenting opinions.

**Limitations and Researcher Bias**

The generalizability of study results is limited due to the non-random sample size of 30 participants. Additionally, most participants were from my professional network or referrals of my professional network. Rubin and Rubin (2012) hold that “…participants will often craft their responses to appear amenable to the researcher or to protect their self-interests” (pg. 297). This may have influenced the interviewees in that they may have attempted to assist me by providing answers they thought I wanted to hear.
Because I have experience with the positive influence of dissent and the negative influence of the lack of dissent in my professional career, I may have viewed the data with a biased lens. Researchers should be aware of how their attitudes influence the questions they ask and their reactions to responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I worked to mitigate this bias by asking many open-ended questions and not sharing my assumptions before or during interviews. I also limited the number of participants from my workplace to three and worked to include a heterogeneous sample of participants. The sample included participants from six different industries and a wide variation of organization sizes. This diverse sample was designed to account for any bias I may have based on my specific experience in the industry I work in. This also allowed for an understanding of practices that are effective regardless of organization size or industry. Participants were also a diverse group in terms of sex, race, and location. Small sample sizes of great diversity “yield important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity” (Patton, 2005, p. 235).

In addition, the design of the research may have introduced bias in that interviewees reported on their observations in the workplace. These observations were based on recall of events and thus relied on the memories of participants (Patton, 2005). Furthermore, the observations might include interviewee bias based on that interviewee’s experience in the organization and level of contentment with the job. If, for example, an interviewee is frustrated that recent dissent was not considered, the observations reported by that individual may be skewed. The questions were designed to reduce this risk in that questions focused on organizational practices and observations about specific topics in
the workplace. This seemed to be effective because the data did not produce many personal examples of dissent expression. The mini case studies also helped to reduce interviewee bias. Interviewees from the same organization reported similar observations. When there was an outlier in a case study organization’s data, interviewee bias was one possible explanation.

Moreover, the participants in the study are all leaders at the director level and above. It is possible that employees in lower levels of the organization would report different observations from those reported by the leaders in the same organizations. This will be discussed further in the next section on future recommendations for research.

Finally, coding reliability can be a limitation of qualitative research. To mitigate this limitation, clear code definitions were established, and a spreadsheet of code categories and sample excerpts was shared with my dissertation committee early in the analysis process. Dedoose (version 8.0.35, 2018) software was used for coding and data analysis. The code categories and associated notes were tracked in the software, and this provided an efficient way to filter code excerpts as a method to verify code categories and thus increase reliability. Codes were reviewed for accuracy three times, in phases one through three of the coding process. Excerpts that were deemed to fit better into a different code category were re-categorized as necessary. When categories for specific excerpts were unclear, transcripts were reviewed to understand the broader context of an excerpt.
Recommendations for Future Research

There are a number of opportunities for future research. One category of research would be to expand the sample size to see if the results can be replicated. Other suggestions for future research relate to different approaches to participant selection. The last focus on future research could be on decision outcomes to delve more deeply into how innovative ideas originate.

Because the participants of the current study are leaders of organizations, the data reveal observations about organizational dissent through the leadership lens. It is possible that employees who are not in leadership positions would observe dissent differently in the organization. Perhaps lower level employees observe more or less dissent than leaders of the organization. It would also be valuable to understand their view of whether dissent influences decision outcomes. Therefore, one recommendation for future studies would be to include the perspectives of non-leaders in organizations.

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study with a larger sample size in additional industries to determine if the results can be replicated. A larger study would contribute to a deeper understanding of the range and variation of organizational practices that encourage dissent. It would also be valuable to look at dissent in other industries such as manufacturing.

A comparison of dissent in small, medium, and large organizations may be of interest. In the current study, midsize organizations seemed to have less dissent expression than small or large organizations. It is possible that smaller organizations find it easier to obtain opinions from many in the organization, and larger organizations need
to develop formal practices for input in order to survive. For example, healthcare and technology companies in this study had more formal mechanisms for employee input. This may be due to the competitive nature of those industries. A future study could determine the validity of this hypothesis.

Two participants in the study mentioned that a portion of their employees were unionized. One of these participants observed that

“They're union guys so they've got a union standing behind them, they've got bargaining so there's a dynamic to that that makes them more comfortable with dissent and expressing it that you may not see in an office worker that is not part of the union, is not going to address management that same way. (Interviewee 37, personal communication, March, 2018)

A study investigating environments in which there are more employment protections would add to the literature. Perhaps union employees and those in European countries exhibit a higher level of dissent. Further research in different environments and cultures would be valuable. On several occasions, study participants mentioned observed differences in dissent of employees and clients from other cultures outside of the U.S. Croucher et al. (2009) compared dissent between American and Indian organizations and found that Americans who have more tenure in an organizations are more likely to express dissent than Indians with similar tenure. Another 33-nation study explored the difference between tight cultures with strong norms and a low tolerance for deviant behavior and loose cultures that have weak social norms and a high tolerance of deviant behavior (Gelfand et al., 2011). The researchers concluded that tight nations are more likely to have a scarcity of resources and autocratic rule that suppresses dissent. Tight nations also have fewer political rights and social liberties. Although there are some studies on cultural differences in dissent expression, there are not many. An exploration
and comparison of dissent across cultures would be beneficial particularly in the current
day environment where so many organizations operate globally.

Examples of organizational decisions influenced by dissent were identified
through this research. Further analysis of specific organizational decisions influenced by
dissent is needed to confirm that dissent can lead to innovation and avoidance of
mistakes. A study in which the researcher observes decision-making meetings in
organizations would also add to the understanding of practices and their influence on
decision making.

Furthermore, research to assess the value of various decision-making
interventions is recommended. For example, if organizations that do not have decision-
making practices learn and implement a decision-making model, the influence of the
model on dissent expression and decision outcomes can be analyzed. Other interventions
might include training on advanced facilitation techniques and assigning a facilitator to
implement the new model to understand how this practice influences results. In addition
to analyzing decision outcomes, business results can be studied to assess the influence of
dissent expression on business results.

Moreover, a comparison of practices would be valuable. Does an innovation
contest have as much influence as weekly town hall meetings? Does an organization
need a variety of practices to be successful in evoking employee ideas? Organizations
can benefit from these answers. Obtaining employee input through a survey to learn
which practices bring forth the most dissent and consideration in organizations from the
employee perspective would also be a valuable contribution to the literature.
Societal Implications

Power was a prominent theme in the data and had even more influence than anticipated on the expression of dissent in organizations in the study sample. A greater understanding of the literature on power would be valuable for future research on organizational dissent. Political and social theorists have discussed power throughout history. Lukes (1974) was one of the first to expand on earlier power theories by espousing that the absence of grievance does not equate to consensus. There are “many ways that potential issues are kept out of politics… this can occur in the absence of actual, observable conflict, which may have been successfully averted” (Lukes, 2005). Lorenzi (2006) summarizes Lukes’ theory and explains that power can be exercised by shaping preferences and preventing grievances. This becomes a value or ethical issue for Lukes (2005). Political theory often focuses on the influence A has over B and whose interests are being served. Just as organizational literature indicates that dissent can lead to better decisions (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1972; Esquivel & Kleiner, 1996; Nutt, 1999; Garvin and Roberto, 2001), governments need to understand the value of dissent. When there is an absence of conflict about a particular issue such as an environmental issue or gun control, the community is not well-served. The issue will often resurface in a crisis environment and will be more difficult to manage. This happens in political and organizational environments. This study took place during a very contentious political period in the U.S. At a time when many organizations in the study are trying to figure out how to solicit dissent, many U.S. governmental leaders are ridiculed for dissenting and terminated for voicing opposition. When governments prevent dissent or neglect to listen
to it, society and future generations suffer the consequences. Ethics are at play when dissent is absent as is the potential success of the organization or the well-being of society as a whole. When organizations fail to listen to dissent, they can make important mistakes or may even fail to exist. Political theory can inform dissent research and research on practices that solicit dissent, can in turn inform political practices. What are the best practices for hearing public opinion and listening to public views? How is this valuable to politicians and society? Historically, if one has a dissenting opinion in the public sphere, he or she can exercise the right to vote, write about it publicly, discuss it with others or protest. Are we using the best practices to obtain public dissent and consider input on key issues? A connection between the political theory literature and dissent research is recommended to provide a deeper understanding of the value of conflict and mechanisms for evoking and acting on dissent.

**Recommendations for Practice**

There are many possible ways to apply findings from this research to practice in organizations. The recommendations in this section relate to five main areas of practice. First, hiring practices for talent could benefit from this research. Next, mechanisms for encouraging employee input reported in this study can be implemented in organizations that are seeking more dissent. Third, a process for communication from employees to senior leaders is suggested. Fourth, the connection between reward systems and dissent will be discussed. Lastly, there are many opportunities for organizations to expand learning offerings related to group dynamics, practices that evoke dissent, and decision-making models.
Hiring Practices

Many organizations today screen new hires for organizational fit. Tests are sometimes given to assess whether candidates will fit and succeed in the organization’s culture. Assessment of organizational fit may make sense with regard to some factors such as the speed at which work is accomplished in an organization. However, hiring for organizational fit may not make sense at all if an organization is seeking dissent and current employees are not providing it. As a practitioner, I observe situations where teams seek to hire employees whose personality meshes with others on the team. Perhaps organizations would be better served to seek employees who have the skills to assert an unpopular view or dissent when a proposed course of action is problematic. Does the prospective hire have the confidence to clearly express views when necessary? This skill can be assessed through behavioral questions such as: “Tell me about a time when you disagreed with a course of action at work. Please describe the situation and explain how you handled it. What successes and failures have you had related to the expression of dissent at work?” Probing questions about whether dissent was expressed to leaders and how it was expressed can provide additional information about confidence. Leaders and employee groups can be encouraged to hire those who are different from other team members and who display confidence.

Although assessment of dissent behavior provides valuable information for hiring, it is important to understand the difference between the effective dissenter and a complainer or resister of change. In my experience, the difference between the effective dissenter and complainer can be assessed by looking at the purpose of the dissent.
Dissent can be valuable when it leads to efficiency, effectiveness and improved outcomes for the organization. On the other hand, dissent that leads to short term satisfaction, but is a barrier to long-term success is not valuable to the organization. An employee may dissent, for example, when asked to work in two computer systems during a transition period that will be short term and result in an improved process for the organization. Dissent that becomes personal instead of task oriented can also be damaging instead of productive. Ward et al. (2007) hold that the right type of conflict makes a difference; constructive debate can be a byproduct of task conflict, but decision making can be negatively influenced by relationship conflict. If employees and leaders can be taught about the difference between valuable dissent and resistance, the likelihood of effective dissent may increase and resistance might decrease or turn into a suggestion that is beneficial to the organization.

Diversity of thought and approach might be more helpful to organizations than hiring employees who think and act like current employees. This would be a shift in philosophy for many organizations and would require training on how a team would benefit from diversity in terms of roles and a willingness to share alternative views. To take this idea of diversity a step further, organizations could benefit from tying diversity and inclusion practices to dissent encouragement processes. This would provide additional rationale for sharing dissent. If an organization values all employees and desires to include everyone as a model of serving diverse customers, it would be incumbent upon leaders in the organization to explain the importance of dissent within the overall context of diversity and inclusion efforts.
Meetings and Contests as Mechanisms for Dissent

In terms of recommendations for organizational practices that provide avenues for dissent, organizations could move beyond the communication of core values and implement mechanisms to obtain dissent. Although core values can be valuable in creating a culture of dissent, they are not enough. When an organization believes, for example, that one-on-one meetings are important for leading direct reports, the organization could hold leaders accountable to hold the meetings. In my experience, it is a challenge for organizations to ensure that leaders meet with direct reports individually on a regular basis. Some have moved to requiring leaders to document meetings with direct reports. The results of this study indicate an even stronger need for these meetings. As outlined in Chapter 4, 100 percent of study participants indicated that more dissent is shared in one-on-one meetings and in smaller groups than in larger groups. Likewise, leaders can be held accountable for meeting with their staff and relevant stakeholders to obtain input on solutions to problems and ways to improve processes. Executives can ask their leaders what they have done to obtain ideas and dissent from employees. Holding leaders accountable for obtaining and reporting on views emphasizes the value an organization places on dissenting opinions.

In addition to holding leaders accountable for obtaining dissent via team meetings and one-on-one conversations, organizations might add collaborative practices such as transparent online communication with leaders and colleagues. Town hall meetings and innovation challenges can be time consuming, but according to the data in the study, they can be quite effective in bringing out valuable ideas. Six participants from six different
organizations, specifically used the term town hall meeting to describe a process to obtain employee feedback and dissent. Participants describe town hall meeting as a meeting that includes a specific group, location or the entire company. Depending on how these meetings are structured, employees may be able to openly ask questions and express concerns about products, projects, or the company’s direction. In some organizations, employee are able to join live or call in. In distinguishing effective town hall meetings from ineffective ones, the frequency of the meetings, presence of leaders who can facilitate change, and commitment to actions related to suggestions were important factors mentioned in the data. A final key factor seems to be the ability of employees to communicate to leaders in addition to top down communication of corporate updates.

The best example of a town hall meeting that encouraged dissent was described by participant 40 (personal communication, June, 2018). The success of this mechanism for input was attributed to a number of factors including the CEO’s presence and that of other high level executives. In addition, these town hall meetings are held weekly on a consistent basis. Employees voluntarily approach the microphone and challenge senior leaders on any issue. At times, research is required and senior leaders needed to obtain information and report back to employees at a future meeting. Employees are expected to have data or necessary information to support their views when asking questions. Although difficult, executives, in this example, want to hear and consider valid input. Employees take the risk to make suggestions. The company recognizes employees who share valuable dissent by communicating stories as positive examples of how feedback produced positive results. An example of a town hall meeting came from participant 31
(March, 2018) who described quarterly town halls designed to communicate information from senior levels to all employees. The participant finds these meetings productive especially in a large organization where employees do not often have access to senior leaders. The meetings are primarily for communication to employees, but sometimes allow for communication from employees. Although regular town hall meetings can be time consuming, organizations who do not provide regular mechanisms for feedback, may benefit from the implementation of a regularly scheduled town hall meeting. For those that have town hall meetings, it may be valuable to re-evaluate the structure of the meetings to allow avenues for employee dissent.

Although town hall meetings can bring about dissent and valuable ideas according to study participants, innovation challenges provide a mechanism to obtain more details about proposed suggestions. Like town hall meetings, innovation challenges have various names and take on many forms. Only three participants mentioned competitions in the form of innovation challenges, but all three participants are from organizations that scored high on dissent expression. Since the interview questions did not include a specific question about competitions, it is possible that more organizations in the study sample use this method to solicit employee ideas. Participant 28 (March, 2018) explained an innovation competition that stands out in several ways. First, the contest is an annual contest and resources are committed each year to both evaluate the presentations and fund the implementation of winning ideas. Second, high level leaders including the CEO evaluate ideas. Finally, employees observe that winning ideas are implemented. Therefore, a well-designed contest or innovative challenge provides a
venue for employees to not only share their thoughts that the organization should move in a different direction, but to flesh out the details and present a plan of action to affect change. Organizations looking to obtain innovative ideas and dissent from the employees doing the work, could consider investing in innovation challenges.

**Resources Dedicated to Upward Communication**

To move from core values related to employee input to more comprehensive methods for obtaining dissent, organizations should consider dedicating resources to the upward communication of employee thoughts to senior leaders. Leaders in organizations today are asked to obtain input from their teams and share important input with other leaders in the organization. In a McKinsey study of leadership behavior, Feser, Mayol, and Srinivasan (2015) found that four key leader behaviors account for 89 percent of leader effectiveness. One of those key behaviors is “seek different perspectives.” In my work as a practitioner, I notice that some leaders are effective in obtaining input and others struggle with this endeavor. Even when leaders are good at seeking the perspectives of others, additional organization-wide mechanisms for obtaining input across functions is necessary. An employee in the marketing division may have an innovative idea related to the technology division. How do the most creative and innovative ideas cross-pollinate in an organization? In my organization, the annual planning process previously involved senior leaders drafting a list of items to accomplish the next year and providing input to one another. Three years ago, we started a process where leaders ask their teams for items that should be in the plan. Mid-level and senior leaders then come together and discuss ideas related to any division in the company. This
process creates better ideas, important discussions about strategy and prioritization, and leads to buy-in from all levels.

Processes to obtain input from all levels require thought, extensive planning and the resources to carry out plans. Communication departments are often formed by organizations that get to a point in their growth when it becomes challenging to get the word out to employees about organizational direction and key initiatives. The time spent on this type of communication is deemed valuable enough to dedicate resources to the effort. The same level of resources should be dedicated to obtaining employee input and communicating ideas upward. Upward communication methods might include regular town hall meetings, innovation contests, and more opportunity for online or in-person communication with leaders. Many organizations survey employees and work to improve employee engagement after surveys reveal areas of need. More proactive mechanisms for input and dissent are recommended. These practices require a significant amount of planning time and resources to consider, evaluate and follow up on suggestions. Organizations that want to see results from employee input will indicate commitment to this endeavor by dedicating resources to upward communication.

**Reward and Recognition**

Another important factor to consider with regard to practice is whether dissent expression is related to reward and recognition. If employees, especially at the lower levels of an organization are publicly recognized for catching a mistake or dissenting in some other way, others will be more likely to dissent. Reward of leaders with regard to dissent could also be evaluated by organizations. Leaders’ performance and
compensation could be tied to the level of dissent encouraged and obtained from their teams. If seeking the views of others is not factored into recognition and compensation, we will not be unable to make traction with regard to dissent expression. Leaders should be asked to create a list of employee suggestions, be held accountable for evaluating those suggestions, and be held accountable for implementation plans when appropriate. Such processes will become even more important as organizations make critical projections about the future in many industries experiencing significant change and disruption.

Learning Opportunities

The study results have many implications for learning and development in organizations. To be effective in obtaining and processing dissent, leaders need to learn about group dynamics and how to facilitate group meetings. Training on how to receive, process, and respond to dissent in a safe way is critical for maintaining an environment that encourages dissent. Although this topic may be touched on within the context of leadership training, in my experience, there is not much training in this area offered by organizations today. Likewise, employees can benefit from an understanding of group roles, the value of dissent, and how and when to share dissent. Furthermore, many organizations are offering training on how to have difficult conversations and give and receive feedback. Expanding such training to include learning on specific practices that encourage dissent and how to implement them is recommended.

Another important area of training that could benefit leaders is training on how to confidently present data and express opinions that may be counter to the views of others
in the organization. Earlier in this chapter, the importance of assessing the confidence of prospective hires was discussed. It is also important to coach and teach employees how to assert thoughts in the face of opposition. Learning these behaviors and practicing delivering difficult messages is recommended. Given group dynamics and the data in this study that indicates that views are less likely to be expressed in large groups, this training is even more important for organizational success.

Finally, organizations will benefit from educating organizational leaders and employees on new decision-making models and implementing models for key decisions. Although some organizations use models, many do not. Such models would include considering more than one alternative, gathering data, obtaining stakeholder views, and assessing the risk of each alternative. Including in-house or outside facilitators or process checkers would also lead to more effective implementation of decision-making practices.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the practices organizations employ to solicit and consider dissent. The research also examined the influence of these practices on organizational decision making. This research provides strong support for the literature and extends the literature by 1) identifying methods and practices used by organizations in the sample that encourage dissent; 2) providing specific accounts from leaders in organizations that show that dissent can a) lead to innovation; b) lead to avoidance of mistakes; and c) lead to mistakes when it is absent or not considered. Prior literature addressed the value of dissent, but few qualitative studies provide examples of organizational decisions resulting from dissent. Organizational history, culture and leadership influenced the expression of
dissent in the study sample as did the confidence of the dissenter. Power and consequences were reported barriers to effective dissent in the study, but were mitigated through effective dissent encouraging practices.

Additional findings in the study highlight 1) the importance of one-on-one and small group communication in soliciting dissenting views; 2) decision-making methods that can provide an avenue to evoke and consider dissent; 3) more organizations in the sample focused on various stakeholder views than the assignment of a devil’s advocate; 4) practices that solicit dissent can be valuable even when dissent is not heeded as they can lead to a quick reversal of a decision when necessary.

Tremendous opportunities exist for research on organizational dissent and decision making. This study makes a connection between the organizational dissent and decision-making literature. Future studies might explore this connection in more detail. As the role of dissent in organizational success becomes clearer, more organizations will implement practices to solicit and consider dissent. An understanding of when and how to implement such practices will be of value to organizations.

Likewise, the implications for practice are many. The ways in which leaders are expected to seek input may become formalized, and leaders may be held accountable for obtaining dissent in the future. Employees may also be asked to actively express thoughts, and they may be held accountable for doing so. For all of this to be effective, leaders and cultures will need to support opposing views and create safe spaces for the expression of dissent. Success will also depend on the method for evaluating and deciding when actions should be taken based on dissenting views.
The topic of dissent is critically important to the future of organizations. Although thoughtful implementation of dissent encouraging practices is expensive and time consuming, it is necessary for the success and at times the survival of organizations. The cost of listening to dissent outweighs the risk of expensive mistakes, ethical violations, or even fading into obsolescence. If the collective minds of those in the organization are not tapped for their best ideas and concerns about proposed plans, survival will be unlikely as we face the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2017). Organizations are currently faced with key decisions when they lack important information about the future. Change is inevitable. Effectively generating and evaluating strategic scenarios for transformation may distinguish successful from unsuccessful organizations. Dissent will be a critical ingredient in that process as organizations and society grapple with critical decisions and an uncertain future.
Appendix A

Interview Questions

Research Questions

• What practices or models do organizations employ to solicit and consider dissent in organizational decision making?

• How do practices that encourage dissent influence organizational decision making?

1. Is there an organizational philosophy or culture related to expression of dissent (i.e., a belief that people should voice concerns or keep concerns to themselves)? What is it and how is this communicated, if at all?

   a. Do people behave according to this culture or philosophy?

2. Please describe any procedures in place that encourage people to agree or disagree with a course of action. This may be intentional or unintentional.

3. When someone in your organization disagrees with a course of action or a decision, what does he/she typically do?

4. How do decision makers react to dissenting opinions?

   a. How does the CEO react? Other leaders?

   b. Can you think of some examples?

5. What factors influence whether a person will voice an opposing view?

6. How does the tenure or level of employee influence whether or not dissent is expressed?

7. Is there a difference between opposition expressed in one-on-one meetings versus larger meetings? On the phone, in webinars, or emails? Please explain.

8. Are there organizational decision making or other procedures that include seeking out alternative viewpoints? Please explain.

   a. Are there procedures to gather data to assist in decision making?

   b. Does your organization look at more than one option when making decisions? What form does this take?
c. Are there procedures to look at how a proposed course of action might fail?

d. Is anyone assigned to play devil’s advocate for important decisions?

9. Explain how debate works in your organization.

   a. How long does debate about a proposed course of action typically last?
   b. Are a variety of options and positions considered during debate?
   c. Are comments typically task oriented or does debate become personal?
   d. Are there any guidelines or procedures for keeping debates focused?
      Moving debates to a conclusion?
   e. Are conclusions reached via consensus, vote, or some other means?

10. Can you think of a past decision that was influenced by a dissenting view
    (regardless of whether dissent was listened to or not)?

    a. Consider mistakes that were made or avoided.
    b. Consider development of innovative products or services.

11. When dissent did influence a decision, how did that occur?

    a. Over what period of time?
    b. Who dissented?
    c. How was the dissent communicated? To whom?
    d. What was the outcome?

12. Is there another example of a decision that was influenced by dissent? (Repeat
    questions 12 and 13)

13. When you think about the terms dissent, conflict, and debate, do you think about
    them as similar constructs or do the terms have very different meaning to you?

Recording Off

Organization Information: Number of employees_____ Annual Revenue_____
Industry___________

Home Office Town/City________ US state or Country_______
Primary Area of Operation (Regional, Throughout US, or Global)

_______________

Is there anyone else in your organization who might be willing to participate in this study?

Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with me. I very much appreciate your time and input.
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