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Power and Trust/Transparency: A Force to Be Reckoned With When Applied  
to Internal Strategic Communication in  
the Department of Defense

Mandy Seeley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Power and Trust/Transparency: A Force to Be Reckoned with when Applied to Internal Strategic Communication within the Department of Defense

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This Master's Thesis sets out to learn why internal strategic communication is not improving as quickly as one might hope in one office of the Department of Defense. Many articles support the need for improved internal strategic communication. But during the author's summer internship, she noted the communications team struggled to make this happen. The author therefore wondered why these communication professionals were not successful. What is hindering their success? Two earlier research papers showed trust, transparency, leadership, diversity and conflict were all connected to internal strategic communication- either positively or negatively. But one new theme arose from these studies: that of power. The current study employs an exploratory case study to look more closely at why power may be a factor- as well as exploring any other possible reasons in order to answer why internal communication is not improving very quickly in this one office. Current and former members of a strategic communication team were asked for their opinions through open ended survey questions about experiences they had illuminating these concepts. Those responses were triangulated with documents and participant observation. This study illustrates that themes including lack of trust, transparency, empowerment, and inappropriate use of power, all play a role in the success or failure of internal strategic communication. The literature helps explain why these themes are having such an impact.

Keywords: [federal government, power, strategic communication]

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.” This opening line to the popular 80’s song by Guns N Roses (Civil War), originating from the 1967 film Cool Hand Luke, can now be heard echoing down the bicycle-spoked corridors of the Pentagon. The sentiment that internal strategic communication is greatly lacking in its effectiveness is shared by many a Department of Defense personnel- both those in and out of communication roles. At a time when senior leaders are doing all they can to streamline processes and improve efficiencies during tough budget cuts, flawless internal strategic communication is needed now more than ever.

Rear Admiral Frank Thorp IV (Ret.), former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Joint Communication) wrote an article in 2007 expressing the need to improve strategic communication (SC) in the Department of Defense (Thorp, 2007). In his words, “The U.S. military is not sufficiently organized, trained, or equipped to analyze, plan, coordinate, and integrate the full spectrum of capabilities available to promote America’s interests.” He said this would be possible through good communication throughout “all levels of the U.S. government in order to maintain credibility and trust” (p. 2).

Christopher Paul (2011) of the RAND Corporation focused on the need for a clear and universally accepted definition of what SC is in his testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in July 2011. He noted that there is not an agreed upon definition either in academia or in the government (p. 2). Paul said from his research, he saw three areas of disagreement with regard to SC. Those areas include “broadcast and engagement”, transparency, and the purpose of strategic communication.

Throughout the rest of his testimony, Paul makes the following suggestions about SC:

1. Listen to, speak to and engage with *everyone*- keeping in mind that actions speak just as loud as words (p. 4). Thus it is necessary to make sure a policy is followed up by visible action (pp. 5-6).
2. It is important that objectives, goals, and how to attain them are clear and include metrics in order to measure progress and success or failure (p. 5).
3. In order to avoid information fratricide, it is imperative that all messages be coordinated to avoid contradictory messages which can cause the public to see the messengers as not genuine in their communication and intent (p. 6).

Paul's definition of SC is:

Coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives” (p. 6).

In 2009 Paul conducted a study comparing the conclusions and recommendations in 36 reports which spoke about improving SC in federal government. He said all of these reports offered very different ideas on how to improve SC, but there were four themes: better leadership, increased resources, clear definition of strategy, and a need for better coordination (p. 8). Many of the reports also recommended some kind of reorganization, although they had different ideas about how and exactly what should be done (p. 9).

Paul reported that all of the combatant commands in DoD had established some kind of structure to improve SC and in 2010, the Strategic Communication Capabilities Based Assessment was completed, intended to help identify gaps in strategic communication. He also said that while SC offices at the Department of Defense (DoD) moved from Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) intelligence to OSD policy, there was still a lot of uncertainty at lower levels about what SC is and how it should be enacted (p. 11). Paul closed his report with his recommendations for improving SC efforts. His number one suggestion was to have senior leaders state their intents with an accompanying end state, so that everyone knows how to go about the mission (pp. 14-15).

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen published an article touting the need to get back to the basics with SC in the government and military (Mullen, 2009). He postulated that the real problem was not with the communication itself, but with credibility and trust (p. 3). What does trust have to do with SC in federal government? Botan and Taylor (2005) covered this topic in their research on why communication from the Bosnian government was not effective in its efforts to develop a civil society. Simply put, Bosnians did not trust their government. Could this be the same reason for communication breakdowns in the U.S. federal government? Govier (1992) concluded that indeed, “suspiciousness builds on itself and our negative beliefs about the other tend in the worst case toward immunity to refutation by evidence” (p.52).

As we can see from these examples, many have been suggesting in recent years that an improvement is needed in the federal government, specifically in the Department of Defense, with regards to internal strategic communication. Some even offer suggestions on how to do so. They also recognize the impact of trust and transparency on internal SC. I completed a competitive internship in the office of Personnel and Readiness during the summer of 2011. I worked with a strategic communications team that worked directly for the Under Secretary of Personnel and Readiness, called the Under Secretary’s Initiatives Group, or USIG. If I had to sum up my observations from that 10-week experience in one sentence, it would be that much of the stress, frustration, mistakes, and waste I observed were a result of poor internal strategic communication and leadership buy-in and support. It seemed to be a never ending cycle fraught with good intentions, but with a lack of knowledge and leadership to fix. The group I worked with tried over and over to promote successful internal communication strategies, but were often met with resistance, no support, or were ignored. The end result of this conflicting dichotomy

(that of wanting better internal strategic communication, but experiencing push-back every time they tried) was that many people felt helpless to try and improve communication.

Thus arose the basis for the current study. The literature supports the need for improving internal strategic communication and gives suggestions on how to do so. The group I worked with during my internship worked extremely hard to make this goal a reality. Yet from my observations, those efforts were not very successful. For example, during my internship, we became aware that a few offices had all been working on employment initiatives for the same audiences at the same time. These offices could have combined resources, saving time and money had they known. This lack of internal communication led me to the following question- if many people in federal government, specifically the office of Personnel and Readiness (P&R) in the Department of Defense, recognized the importance of internal strategic communication; if documentation exists, like the Rand study, offering suggestions on bettering SC, why wasn't it working? In February 2011, P&R released its 2012-2016 Fiscal Year Strategic Plan. Strategic Goal 5 was to "Develop a P&R strategic communication capability, directly aligned and partnering with the Services and COCOMs" (p. A-1). In the four months since this document's creation, it was evident to me during my internship that although the intent was there, very little had been accomplished towards reaching this goal, and most efforts to do so were met with resistance. I asked myself why?

During fall 2011, I did two research papers to begin answering this question. One focused on trust, transparency, leadership and conflict and how those affected internal strategic communication in P&R (Seeley, 2011a). The other looked at how an increase in diversity may have influenced internal strategic communication efforts (Seeley, 2011b). A new theme emerged from both of these papers- that of the influence of power on internal strategic communication.

Power is an element none of the articles touting the need for improved communication even mentioned. So, further research was conducted for this thesis to look more closely at the element of power and the possible implications it might have on improving internal strategic communication.

The author employed a qualitative exploratory case study in order to answer the question why- why were not efforts to improve internal strategic communication in P&R working? Yin (2009a) described this particular approach “as part of a hypothesis-generating process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), for its goal is not to conclude a study, or generation scholarship on one topic, but to develop ideas for further study (p. 141).” This is exactly the aim of the current study.

Literature from strategic communication, trust, transparency and power were used as guidelines to conduct this study. However, following Yin’s (2003) suggestions, collected data, documents, and the author’s participant observation were analyzed for themes in order to paint a better picture of what is happening in this particular office, allowing for themes not found in the literature to arise. Using the author’s experiences during her internship as a guide, data collected from participants from the previous studies as well as this one will also be analyzed for themes. The initial themes were: desire for increased strategic communication, lack of trust and transparency, and an imbalance of power. These were all issues the author observed repeatedly during her internship. The author’s intention is not to prove power, trust or transparency are the root causes of struggling internal communication initiatives, but rather to describe what is happening in this one office of the Department of Defense, then use the literature to help explain why internal SC is not better.

A brief literature review will explore strategic communication, trust ,transparency and power, all used as guides for this study as they are themes that arose from the author’s previous

research. Following this literature review, a methodology section will describe how the study was carried out to answer the research questions arising from the literature review. A results and discussion section will follow. An appendix at the end of this thesis lists the questions which were asked of participants for the current study with relation to power.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Four main theories provided guidance for the current study- strategic communication, trust, transparency, and power. These theories were selected based on the author's internship experience and earlier research the author conducted. Each of these theories will be explained below.

### **Strategic Communication**

Hoover (2010) suggested strategic communication (SC) is what “moves an organization from strategy development to implementation” (p. 16). D'Aprix (1996) described strategic communication as designing a strategy to convey goals, values, vision, and intentions of an organization to its audiences (or publics). Steyn (2007) suggested most scholars and professionals agree strategy has to do with conceptualization of how a communication will be shared before it is implemented (p. 147). Hoover (2010) proposed strategic communication should “synchronize organizational units and align resources to deliver a common core message” (p. 17). Taking SC one step further, Hoover suggested the strategy be active in nature, and not reactive. This, he said, “establishes organizational clarity and dissuades freelance endeavors that may serve a few well, but detract from the organization's overall direction and purpose” (p. 17).

Hoover (2010) noted many government and law enforcement agencies skip the strategy and go straight to a tactical approach when responding to their publics. He further stated:

In a complex world, leaders cannot simply create a policy, push it down the chain of command, and expect it to automatically come to fruition. Messages bombard people all day every day; a strategically delivered one will resonate better with employees. (p. 17)

Many authors within the past few years have addressed the need for better strategic communication both by the U.S. military and the U.S. government (Deutsch, 2010; Lord, 2010;

Mullen, 2009; Thorp, 2007). Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted that trust and credibility were key ingredients in successful strategic communication (Mullen, 2009). Trust will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Mullen further suggested our country needed to work on building credibility... something he says cannot be gained in a talking point (p.4) (in federal government speak, that means a bullet point in a Power Point presentation.). He explains:

“...there has been a certain arrogance to our ‘strat comm’ efforts. We’ve come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect. They are not. Good communication runs both ways. It is not about telling *our* story. We must also be better listeners.” (p. 4)

Mullen advised that in order to produce good strategic communication, we need to understand the receiver’s culture, values, and hopes. Only then can two-way communication be established.

**Internal strategic communication.** Internal communication is something researchers and practitioners alike have put under the microscope for at least 25 years. Cutlip et al. (1985) proposed “No organizational relationships are as important as are those with employees” (Dolphin, 2005, p. 171). Asif and Sargeant (2000) noted however that in order for internal communication to be effective, it was critical that organizations develop a culture of communication permeating all corners of the organization. That, as Johnson (2001) noted, is one of the three main challenges facing many organizations. Dolphin (2005) therefore set out to determine if internal communicators were acting strategically or still focused on tactics. The author first combined thoughts from many researchers and came up with the following definition for internal communication:

...transactions between individuals and groups at various levels and in different areas of specialization (Frank and Brownell, 1989) and these transactions are intended to design (and redesign) organizations and coordinate day-to-day activities. Communication dynamics in organizations are necessarily multifaceted and intricate (Buckley et al., 1998), reflecting the complex norms, values, climate and goals of the organization, perhaps because communication is a multidimensional construct (Smidts et al., 2001) (p. 172).

Internal communication was once a function of the human resources (HR) department (Sprague & Del Brocco, 2002). Johnson (2001) suggested, however, that today's communication departments have an advantage over HR in that they often work more quickly, getting important messages out in a more timely manner. Wright (1995) explained it is important to keep communication departments separate, and include a communication professional at the executive level so that the group does not become lost in a marketing function, and thereby lose its effectiveness in the organization.

Grimshaw and Barry (2008) listed what results come from poor internal communication: failed initiatives sometimes costing the organization millions of dollars, difficulty in establishing credibility and growing loyalty with personnel and leaders find it difficult to get personnel to participate in necessary knowledge sharing across the organization in order to efficiently meet objectives (p. 28). They developed a Strategic Communication Maturity Model (SCMM) which is designed to help improve internal strategic communication. The model has five levels which can help leaders determine where their organization is at, and how to get better. The five levels, with one being the least mature are:

1. "Efficiently and reliably delivering formal communication products 'to specs'
2. Developing and executing outcomes-based communication strategy- with formal communication vehicles
3. Helping leaders 'manage meaning' through decisions, actions, recognition, and informal (and formal) channels
4. Aligning and engaging the organization around the business strategy
5. Promoting organizational effectiveness through improved communication, both vertically and laterally" (pp. 29-30)

This model was created with the intention of opening up communication between senior leaders and communication practitioners. They could use this to conduct an analysis of their organization's current maturity, and then set goals to progress towards level 5.

Kitchen (1997) advised that personnel who are not well informed may become unmotivated and therefore less productive. Wright (1995) also submitted that internal publics who are well informed are more trusting of senior leaders and management. This leads to a more in-depth discussion on trust, which is included in the following section.

## **Trust**

Organizational trust can be defined as “the collective level of positive expectations that members have about others and the group as a whole” (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 254). Trust exists when members believe others will honor commitments. Christen (2004) found that groups were more likely to be willing to negotiate (a process necessary in forming and executing a strategic communication plan) if they perceived trustworthiness in the other group. In particular in these findings, the relationship was strongest between a county council being more willing to negotiate with businesses they thought were trustworthy (p. 256).

In order to gain trust, people expect others to be competent, open and honest, concerned about employees, reliable, and they need to identify with the organization's fellow workers, management, and culture (pp. 254-255). In turn, trust encourages teamwork, risk taking and cooperation, increases quantity and quality of information flow, and improves problem solving (p. 254). Trust can be increased if strategic communicators are honest. Steyn (2007) explained that someone working in a SC position not only has the responsibility of passing along corporate messages and goals from management to stakeholders and employees, but also “facilitating the implementation of cultural change within organizations, helping to build a climate of mutual

trust and understanding between managers and employees” (p. 143). Christensen and Langer (2009) said:

It is certainly the task of public relations to enhance trust in the organization by providing trustworthy information, but this does not mean that public relations presents the truth about an organization, as truth is always rhetorically negotiated (Heath, 2001). While public relations cannot provide full symmetrical transparency to all stakeholders, it has to take account of the situational interests, openness and reception of particular stakeholders, as well as their different and varying information needs. (pp. 15-16)

Trust is a valuable but fragile commodity. Dishonesty, inconsistency, finger pointing, micromanaging, and secrecy, to name a few, can all undermine trust (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 255). Mullen (2009) noted that actions speak louder than words and the U.S. Government reduces its publics’ trust by not delivering on its promises. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2011) was established in 2000 to measure levels of trust between people and different organizations around the world. In its most recent survey, results showed that globally, trust in government increased five percent, up to 52%, (p. 5). However, the United States in particular saw a drop by six percent. Only 40% of American’s surveyed trusted the “government to do what is right” (p. 7). Compare this to China and Brazil, where 88% and 85% respectively of respondents said they trust their government to do the right thing. Germans reported the lowest level of trust in government, at 33%.

Other researchers found that trust in local and state government is either improving or holding steady, while declining at the federal level (Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Cole & Kincaid, 2006; Hetherington & Nugent, 2001). Because there is such a drop in trust at the federal government level, there is a need to research why this is happening, and offer suggestions for how this can improve, especially if this decline in trust exists within the federal government itself. This provides another reason why the current study is timely and important.

Williams (2005) and Rawlins (2008) found that trust is interrelated to transparency. Specifically, Rawlins noted that as organizations increase information sharing, increase two-way communication with publics, and open themselves up to criticism, the level of trust from their public increases. Transparency, therefore, needs further exploration.

## **Transparency**

Many forces are combining in today's corporate world in support of greater transparency. After numerous financial institution scandals, Christensen and Langer (2009) noted stakeholders, law makers, new media and various interest groups are pressuring companies to disclose more information. However, the authors cite research showing that increased transparency is not a new proposal, dating back to classical Greek and ancient Chinese ideas. They propose corporate transparency has simply caught the public's attention more over the past ten years.

Corporate America has not been the only target of greater transparency requests. Despite visible efforts of keeping his promise for greater federal government transparency, groups have criticized President Obama's efforts to make information more readily available. The National Security Archive released a report in March 2010 suggesting the Obama administration's efforts had been slow and inconsistent across government offices (The National Security Archive, 2010). They noted findings of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests dating back 18 years and still pending. While this and other reports illustrate the public's outcry for better outward transparency, very little can be found on inward transparency.

Heald (2006) broke transparency into four categories: upwards, downwards, outwards, and inwards. Upwards and downwards transparency refers to employees, no matter where they sit in the organizational hierarchy, being able to learn about what is going on at the other end of the spectrum. Transparency outwards and inwards refers to employees seeing activities outside

the company, and people outside the company seeing activity inside the company, respectively. Christensen and Langer (2009) suggested refining transparency inwards as members of an organization being able to see activity going on inside the organization. For the purposes of the current study, we will focus on upward and downward transparency, as well as Christensen and Langer's revision of inward transparency.

Transparency involves more than simply being able to see into an organization, or have information made available to a public. Heald (2006) suggested it also provides information that the receiver understands and can process, and subsequently use. Many organizations use transparency now as a way of deflecting possible blame should something go wrong (O'Neill, 2006), something Rindova (2001) called "polished transparency". This form of strategic transparency then results in an unbalanced share of information, as only insiders or experts will understand the message and be able to use the information, rather than the intended audience (O'Neill, 2006). What further complicates sending out accurate information to publics is that sometimes internal publics do not benefit from transparency, and therefore cannot increase transparency with external publics (Christensen and Langer 2009). Thus it becomes the job of a strategic communicator or public relations professional to facilitate transparency between internal publics such that external publics can also be well informed, while still maintaining an appropriate degree of security, especially in the government when so many documents are highly sensitive (Christensen and Langer 2009).

Dennis McDonald (2011) noted on his website that many government personnel long for better transparency from senior leaders, especially with respect to pending force reductions. He recommends that senior leaders offer places for personnel to vent, and provide honest and open communication about what to expect so rumors do not get out of control.

Practitioners and researchers also suggest transparency can sometimes have a negative outcome. Heald (2006b) and Cheney (1991) noted war time conflict resolution often involves deploying different messages to different groups- a strategy which does not work if a high level of transparency is in place. Hood (2006) suggested striking a balance between seemingly contradictory freedom of information laws and privacy laws is difficult. While increased acts of terrorism has prompted many organizations, including governments, to be more careful about what they share, the internet has made it more difficult to conceal information (Christensen and Langer, 2009). Other researchers have noted that transparency seems more like an unobtainable goal (Druker & Gumpert, 2007) and that despite an organization's best efforts, information often comes out one-sided, breeding more distrust than trust (O'Neill, 2006).

There is a way for communication professionals to successfully increase transparency. Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins (2007) developed the three-dimensional model in government communications. This model helps communicators create objective communication or public relations plans. The model consists of four parts: transparency, communication practices, organizational support, and provision of resources. The model uses transparency as the base for all other aspects working in proper order. In other words, if communicators create plans built on transparency, the other dimensions will work, providing a complete communication package. In order to have better transparency, communication professionals must be committed to transparency, work with managers to encourage transparency throughout the department, and need to be included in management decisions. While the authors specifically focused on external communication by government agencies, the author of the current study proposes this model can also be applied to internal SC practices.

There are a few examples of the Federal Government's efforts to increase transparency. The Principles of Information was instituted in 2001 as a means to ensure information flow between the Department of Defense and its publics (US Department of Defense, 2001). Another effort to increase transparency was the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires federal agencies to craft communications that are clear and easy to understand. The document defined plain writing as, "writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience" (Sec. 3, 3<sup>rd</sup> definition). This followed President Obama's emphasis on increased transparency in his January 2009 Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government (The White House, 2009).

Another document encouraging transparency is the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). This act was written in 1966 and updated in 1996 to include electronic documents (FOIA Update 1996). The Act allows the public to request government documents through a submission process. The author of the current study went through this process to collect documents for study, which will be discussed in greater detail in the results section.

What Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins (2007) did not account for in their transparency model as a possible contributing factor is the influence of power on transparency in government agencies. Power is the main element that arose in the author's previous research, and is therefore included in this study in order to learn more detail about the role it plays in internal strategic communication. Power can take on many forms in an organization, and will be explored further in the next section.

## **Power**

Barbalet (1985) defined power as "Getting things done or getting others to do them." Hackman and Johnson (2009) developed a similar definition, "the ability to influence others" (p.

136). Kennan and Hazleton (2006) said, “critical theorists argue that organizations subjugate various constituencies through a desire to exert hegemony. Hegemony provides the organization with the unquestioned and unthinking allegiance of employees” (p. 318). They continue that critical theorists also suggest this line of thinking results in limited actions and vision within the organization. These limitations are created and re-created by organizational members, which is inevitably “embedded at the deepest level in the symbols that are used unconsciously to describe basic organizational relationships” (p. 318). Put more simply, managers make decisions and employees execute those decisions, no questions asked. This is similar to power control theory which is that those in organizations with the most power are the ones making the organizational decisions (J. E. Grunig, 1992). Those in power often band together in making strategic decisions, shaping organizational ideologies and influencing goals and values. This creates a dominant coalition, of which public relations professionals are often excluded (J. E. Grunig, 1992). L. A. Grunig (1992) suggested the dominant coalition may also exert their power to ensure people develop skills and/or services in which they believe are necessary to get things done. Although power often has a negative connotative meaning, Mumby (1988) put forth that it can serve as an integrating force rather than domination.

Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) noted in their excellence study that many public relations practitioners have been fighting for a seat at the table for years. They suggested this lack of empowerment by senior leaders is most likely because senior leaders fail to recognize the importance of public relations professionals, or public relations professionals do not have the expertise needed to meet demands when senior leaders do see a need. The excellence theory proposed that including public relations professionals wasn't in an effort to usurp power in the decision making process, but to add expertise that can come from these professionals to the

strategic communication process (Grunig et al., 2002). A lack of empowerment has negative consequences for an organization. Without communication specialists planning, executing and evaluating strategic communication with its publics (including internal ones), it becomes difficult for an organization to meet its goals (Grunig et al., 2002; J. E. Grunig, 1992).

Berger (2005) also discussed how an organization's structure with regards to compliance can affect the level of power one has. Spicer (1997) explained larger organizations often cultivate cultures where senior leaders are subject to historical practices, existing rules, and power benefits that can affect perceived or actual power. One of the participants in Berger's (2005) study related this phenomenon using a cowboy and farmer analogy:

Organizations often say they want rugged individuals and people with unique perspectives: you know, cowboys who ride alone, live on the land, and win the gunfights. But what they really want are farmers—folks who mind their own business, tend their land, respect those fence lines. I do not think public relations cowboys make it into the dominant coalition, farmers do. And farmers do not become cowboys once they're there. (p. 15)

This observation illustrates how existing power structures can influence what one is able to do, or not do, with their power. While personnel are expected to do the right thing, pressure from those in senior positions may cause them to question what they should do. House (2005) noted the rigid leader/follower structure common in the military. How would these structures exist in a federal government organization, therefore making it more difficult for a strategic communication professional to do their job? More specifically, how would this rigid structure affect trust and transparency?

Now to tie each of these sections of literature together, we will first revisit strategic communication. Based on numerous examples found in the literature, many people both in the federal government and military, as well as those in academia and the corporate world recognize

the need for good internal strategic communication. Yet this ideal conflicts with what the author observed during her internship in the office of Personnel and Readiness (P&R) in the Department of Defense (DoD). This conflict defines our first research question:

**RQ1-** Why, despite efforts by a strategic communications team in P&R, are efforts to improve internal strategic communication floundering?

Now to revisit the issues of trust and transparency. Much like the literature found on strategic communication, government leaders, academics, and communication practitioners alike agree that if trust and transparency are present in an organization, internal strategic communication will be successful. This leads us to our next research question:

**RQ2-** How do strategic communication professionals describe the element of trust and transparency when related to internal strategic communication?

Now we will finally revisit the element of power, of which respondents in the author's previous research described as being a road block for internal strategic communication efforts. The literature notes that wielding power unwisely, the influence of a rigid military structure, and a lack of empowerment can all impact strategic communication efforts. Yet, this element is not expressed by government leaders as an issue needing to be addressed in relation to strategic communication. The respondents in the author's previous studies would disagree with that, as would the author based on her observations during her internship. Thus emerges our final research question:

**RQ3-** Do communication team members in P&R describe power as an obstacle in promoting better internal strategic communication efforts within P&R?

These three research questions provided the author with a framework in order to analyze the data (participants' answers from a qualitative survey, documents, and participant observation) for a qualitative analysis. This process will be explained in further detail in the following methodology section.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

While some researchers say the purpose of a case study is to be more theory building in nature (Woodside & Wilson, 2004), others show a case study can also test theories, or combine both approaches (Alexander & Bennett, 2005; Woodside & Wilson, 2004). Yin (2003) is one researcher who favored theory based case studies, even though qualitative research does not always follow this pattern, and typically uses grounded theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Fernandez, 2005, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Yin (1991) described grounded theory, introduced by Glaser & Strauss (1967) as a methodology to build theory by identifying emergent themes or categories about a topic. The current study will employ a grounded theory approach. Yin says this supports the qualitative methodology for research. The author also says grounded theory emulates normal science by establishing rigor and can be applied to collected data via existing knowledge, in the field, or both (p.303). In order to provide rigor for this study, the author employed triangulation, as well as conducting member checks. Member checks helped prevent bias from the author. The author also tried to increase the aspect of prolonged engagement by working 40 or more hours a week for 10 weeks during her internship, as well as keeping in touch with people she worked with in order to learn how strategic communication efforts were progressing. As Yin suggested, the current study used existing literature and documents as well as collected data in the field.

Yin specifically explains the exploratory case study. The author (2009b) suggested the best method for answering “why” questions, as the current study does, is to use evidence to build an explanation (p 271). Yin (1991) says an exploratory case study can deal with a complex phenomenon. The author of the current study noted that finding themes or reasons behind ineffective internal strategic communication included multiple possibilities, as the respondents in

previous studies all noted trust, transparency, and power as contributors to problematic internal strategic communication. In addition, they also reported that ineffective leadership could also have an impact. From their responses, it is clear there could be many reasons for ineffective communication, as there are many nuances to trust, transparency, power, and leadership. Yin also said the exploratory case study needs to use multiple sources of evidence. The author combined respondent data, documents from multiple sources, and participant observation for use in the current study.

Yin (2009a) stated that because these types of studies are more complex, and more difficult to get precise, “the better case studies are the ones in which the explanations have reflected some theoretically significant propositions” (p. 141). Following Yin’s approach, the theories presented in the literature review were used as a guide for the author while looking for themes in qualitative data, documents, and participant observation. Yin explained the best process for conducting an exploratory case study as follows:

1. Make an initial theoretical statement or initial proposition about social behavior or policy
2. Compare the findings of an initial case against this proposition or statement
3. Compare other details of the case against the revision
4. Compare the revision to the facts of a second, third, or more cases
5. Repeat the process as needed (p. 143)

Following these guidelines, the author has already stated the initial proposition of this study- which is asking why, even with documentation supporting the notion of improving internal strategic communication in the office of P&R in DoD, is it not happening? The literature review sets out the foundation of the themes which were evaluated in the analysis. Then the results were compared to the existing literature to explain why this might be happening. Finally, the results were compared to other bodies of literature not previously discussed in this study to shed further light on why this phenomenon is occurring. This process was done until the author could find no

other possible literature to support why the emergent themes may be present in P&R. Yin explains this process differs from the typical pattern matching approach in case study formats, but is good for exploratory case studies because it lends itself to emergent themes that were not pre-conceived before the study commenced. This increases rigor by utilizing concurrent validity and decreases the chance of bias in the present study.

Yin (2009b) noted the flexibility case study researchers often find in analyzing the data for emergent themes. The author also explained that while computer programs are available to help with this data analysis, they often only scratch the surface and could miss important meanings and themes (p. 269). For this reason, the author chose to not utilize a program such as NVivo for analyzing the data.

One of the potential problems of this methodology is the risk of the author drifting away from the original focus of the study itself during the exploratory process. Yin (2009a) suggested the way to guard against this danger is by repeatedly going back to the original proposition of the study and comparing that to alternative explanations of the proposition (p. 144). Yin also shares four ways of achieving a “high-quality analysis”. These include: showing that all the evidence has been looked at exhaustively, should address all other rival explanations, the analysis should stay focused on the most important issue of the case, and finally the author’s prior expert knowledge should be used in the study (pp. 160-161). The author followed Yin’s advice throughout this paper, including a complete analysis of the respondent’s data, a complete look at the available documents, and capturing all of the experiences from the author’s participant observation. These components will ensure a high-quality analysis as Yin suggests.

This paper also utilizes a triangulation approach, which Denzin (1978) suggested can be done in multiple ways, as the author hoped to offer multiple perspectives in this study, including

those differing from the author's (Borman, LeCompte, & Goetz, 1986; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) as well as strengthening and refining possible linkages (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) between inadequate internal strategic communication with various concepts- those of trust, transparency and power, and any other themes which should arise.

Former members of a strategic communication team the author worked with during a summer internship (the team was disbanded during restructuring between the time of the author's internship and when this study was conducted) were selected for the study. This was done because of the difficult nature of contacting and scheduling interviews with people working in a communication role within a federal government office, and already existing rapport and trust between said members and the author. Differing from Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins (2007), however, due to time constraints interview questions were put into a Qualtrics questionnaire as open-ended questions. Per the request of a senior leader in P&R on condition of approving this research, the highest level of anonymity was requested. Therefore, follow up questions were not asked. A total of seven questions were asked, including one demographic question. These questions can be found in appendix A. The disadvantage of conducting the research in this manner is the limitation of face-to-face interaction, asking follow-up questions, and ensuring the participant takes time to reflect on their answers. However, the advantage of conducting the study this way is offering respondents plenty of time to formulate their answers in a non-threatening anonymous setting.

Each respondent was sent a generic link to the Qualtrics study. Of the six respondents invited to participate in the study, four completed the questionnaire, two males and two females. All six responded to the author's previous research, some data of which will be referenced in the

results section for additional clarity of the themes. All of the participants are situated in different levels of the P&R structure.

The first page of the Qualtrics study included a consent form which participants clicked “I Agree” or “I Disagree” before proceeding. If they clicked the latter, they were forwarded to the end of the study and thanked for their time. If they clicked “I Agree” they were taken to the next page containing brief definitions of power and strategic communication as defined by the literature review. These definitions can be found in Appendix B. The two participants who chose not to complete the follow-up study did not click on “I disagree” but simply did not participate.

Trustworthiness for these interviews was increased by emailing a copy of the completed results and conclusion sections of the thesis to each participant so they could make any corrections or add clarity as suggested by Wimmer and Dominick (2003) and also employed by Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins (2007). Because the author was not sure who participated and who did not in the follow up study, these sections were sent to all six former members of the team, and on an honor system were asked to only read these sections and add comments or corrections if they had participated.

In the consent form, the interviewees were asked to not discuss their responses with each other until the conclusion of the research project. They were also assured that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous for this study, as only the researcher had access to the data, and precautions were taken so that answers were not made available to internet searches. Participants were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire.

Public documents were gathered through an FOIA request and through an advanced Google search to obtain documents related to SC and the Department of Defense. A search was

done with the terms “strategic communication” and “Department of Defense” with an extension .gov. An additional search was conducted adding the search term “Personnel and Readiness”. The searches were limited to 2006 or newer. Specifically for this thesis, an additional search was conducted in Google using strategic communication, department of defense and power relationships. Most of the documents found either centered on military power or power of other countries. The results of the participant questionnaires, the document search, and the author’s participant observation will all be discussed in the next section.

## Chapter 4: Results

This section reports the results from the participant questionnaires, documents, and participant observation, each in their own section. The results from participant questionnaires is broken down into sections answering each research question. The data for this section comes from the author's previous research, as well as the additional research conducted for the current study. When direct quotes are used in the rest of this paper, any spelling mistakes by the respondents were corrected by the author.

### Participant Questionnaires

**RQ1.** This question asked why the strategic communication team's efforts to improve internal strategic communication seemed to be floundering. All of the respondents reported both good and bad examples of strategic communication. One boldly declared, "From my viewpoint – I do not see effective internal strat comm within the organization." Although many reported poor examples, most responses were tempered with more positive comments, as seen from the examples below.

There was some effective internal communication, but not much.

It continues to grow and evolve.

Though a great deal of improvement has emerged over the last year, there are still pockets of greatness and pockets of isolation within P&R.

A few different themes arose from their responses, including a lack of resources, lack of good examples of effective internal strategic communication, lack of trust, lack of transparency, and inappropriate use of power. The latter three will be included in the RQ2 and RQ3 sections. The following comment from one of the participants sums up why the presence of these themes is not a good thing:

Changes made or contemplated on a large scale that are never addressed by members of leadership to the far corners of the organization, despite the fact that these decisions can potentially affect many of them and rumors about when/how/why the decisions may be made are known to be running rampant and effecting morale.

Examples from each of the aforementioned themes will be given below.

***Lack of resources.*** This category includes many aspects including a lack of education, lack of personnel, lack of time to complete required tasks, and a lack of research and metrics for measuring effective SC. One respondent noted education on the importance of internal strategic communication needed to occur at all levels of the organization. Many participants shared sentiments similar to this one:

Many of the leaders still do not understand strategic communication and (are) much more interested in tactical pieces without a strategy behind them. They fail to understand that solid strategic communications is based in social science research and is not simply an art form or throwing together something pretty that they like in terms of images or words.

One participant noted having sufficient money and personnel was important because, “you cannot expect to institute a strategic communication plan that supports the mission and goals of the organization without proper resources.” On the topic of a lack of effective personnel, one respondent said, “I think leadership talks a big game about needing internal communications but fails miserably on the execution front because they do not have the right people in leadership positions to be EFFECTIVE and have the desired impact. One of the respondents stated that although a plan had been presented to provide improved internal strategic communication, a lack of resources thwarted any efforts to achieve the goals. They continued in describing what effect this lack of resources had on strategic communication efforts:

...most of the time strategic comms professionals are working with ‘multiple hats’ and doing a number of different jobs not focused on the communication goals.

Another person shared the value of having trained professionals in strategic communications positions. Without it, there was no one to provide guidance to leaders on how to effectively communicate. Instead, the respondent suggested people in communication positions without formal training and experience just went along with whatever the senior leader said, even if it wasn't a good strategy.

***Lack of examples of effective communication.*** While one respondent said that they believe internal strategic communication was overall ineffective, they did mention that a little progress had been made in bringing an awareness for the need of better internal strategic communication. Another respondent noted that when they are able to speak “as a single voice, (it) is very clear and loud and apparent in actions and words across the organization. However, it does not occur often enough to be effective as a whole.” A respondent suggested the reason behind a lack of examples was that efforts were still in their infancy, and it would take time to tell if things were improving.

**RQ2.** This research question sought to learn how communication practitioners describe the element of trust and transparency when related to internal strategic communication. The respondents often commented on the obvious lack of both of these elements, which will be described separately below.

***Lack of trust.*** All but one of the respondents said that trust and transparency do not exist within the department. For example, one of the respondents described a time where an idea was planned for “creat(ing) an open dialogue to build trust and credibility between USD (Under Secretary of Defense) and his people.” This respondent did all the work to ready this project's launch, but it took the front office three months to respond. By that time, changes in the organization had made the messages obsolete. The respondent then said the front office decided

the project could not be launched after all. From this experience, the respondent noted that a communications specialist needs senior leaders to trust them if they are to succeed. More specifically:

As a leader, you hire people to do various jobs under you and for you. You need to give general guidance, but TRUST that they will carry out your wishes. If you are not getting results, that's one reason to possibly dive a bit more into the details and maybe "micromanage" a bit until it is under control, but if you never give a person the chance to actually DO what they were brought in to do, it is failure before they begin.

When asked how they felt about working with people who were either effective or ineffective at strategic communications, a different respondent said that of course they would prefer to work with like-minded people (those you trust). But, two respondents pointed out that is not always possible. They both expressed a need to overcome barriers by building trust and opening up communication (transparency). One of them in particular specifically said, "we need to serve in a leadership capacity with these Components to better understand why they function the way they do and maybe even offer up strategies for improving communication plans."

One respondent acknowledged that better SC would enhance trust and transparency. But, they said the right leaders needed to be in place for this to improve. Another respondent said many leaders need to be forced to share information. As the participant noted, it is a balancing act to share appropriate information, due to the nature of their work. But, they said people needed to be educated on what is appropriate to share, and then that information needs to be shared to the lowest levels. A different respondent also noted that having "more than six different leaders at the top" over the past three years has created an atmosphere of distrust.

The one person who thought trust and transparency does exist said the desire is there at all levels, "I do not believe that there yet exists a mistrust of communications from leadership that would make it a waste of time to try."

However, they followed that statement by suggesting if leaders continued to ignore and not address concerns from the lowest ranks, it would “cultivate such a poisonous attitude.”

Another participant said, “There was too much fear and misunderstanding within the org for comm to be effective. Nobody trusted senior leadership so messages were not well received.”

***Lack of transparency.*** All of the respondents shared sentiments that inward transparency did not achieve a high standard. One respondent noted, “We are not tied together as an organization- right hand has no idea what the left hand is doing.” Respondents commented that many messages were not clearly articulated, and this lack of transparency got the rumor mill going- negatively impacting morale. A specific example described by one member was the creation of the USIG (Under Secretary’s Initiatives Group) team itself, which was originally created to be an innovation team, but later included two communications professionals who were supposed to be focusing on communication- not innovation. The member explained that the mission of the team was never fully explained and communicated, causing confusion by senior leaders as to what the members should be doing.

Contrary to this experience, members from the USIG team later formed the P&R Information Exchange Council (P&RIEC) which was more successful at improving communications from the beginning. Respondents said the goals and mission of the group were communicated early on to everyone, so P&R personnel knew what the team’s job was.

Despite the formation of this group, there were still plenty of negative sentiments related to transparency. One participant said the lack of this element resulted in information hitting walls within the department rather than being shared- which then resulted in duplication and inconsistent messages. Another respondent said that although some departments were aware of what others were doing, “most do not feel connected to the entire department and some do not

even realize they are part of P&R.” An example of this was a multitude of employment initiatives being planned in multiple departments. One respondent shared how multiple offices were working on essentially the same program for the same audience. They continued that although project leaders were brought together to try and combine their efforts, not much had been achieved, “in spite of active engagement by the communications specialists and limited encouragement by senior leadership.”

A different participant described how leaders shared confusing and limited information about budget cuts and efficiencies, and people did not know whether they would lose their jobs or not. They said this did not create a hospitable atmosphere for good SC. One participant admitted that although they were in a position where they were supposed to be sharing information, “I am constantly wondering what we are doing as an organization, and where are we going?” Another mentioned that some people do not feel connected to the organization as a whole, “and some do not even realize they are part of P&R.” One suggested senior leaders needed to better share guidance and direction towards the organization’s vision. Another shared how communications professionals were also impacted by a lack of transparency:

Leadership does not always include comms as decisions are being made- still looked at as an afterthought rather than an entity that is needed in order to help effectively EXECUTE organizational plans.

One person suggested the reason for a lack of information sharing was fear- a fear of sharing information that should not be shared due to its sensitivity- a common concern in a federal government environment. They also suggested, however, that it is possible to educate people on appropriately sharing information. Two respondents had more positive things to say, however. One stated things are improving and one said there is enough information sharing now for able people in the department to create effective communication strategies.

Despite all these negative sentiments about trust and transparency, one respondent said they think the seeds are there and just need time to grow. Another said things could improve over time through meetings, the P&RIEC team and more effective organization-wide emails. Another suggested making sure everyone was included would improve awareness and communication efforts. Another observed:

I feel that the DESIRE for transparency from the top down as well as the DESIRE to trust the organizations' leaders to speak truth exists.

**RQ3.** The final research question focused on learning whether communication team members in P&R thought power was an obstacle in promoting better internal strategic communication.

Many respondents noted the need for leadership buy-in to create effective internal strategic communication. One respondent said that a key element to achieving good internal strategic communication includes, “working within an organized, supportive framework that connects leadership to subordinates in a fashion that encourages participation and minimizes conflict.” Unfortunately, as another participant explained, “the front office was a huge hindrance to improving stratcomms.” They continued that even after some reorganization, they believed there would still be people who hindered internal strategic communication efforts.

Another respondent suggested leaders needed to listen and ask for feedback rather than always telling everyone how things would be done. Another participant explained the result of this mind set. The respondent felt the USIG team could not do much to help improve communication because “it was hampered by too many bureaucrats to make it an effective organization.” They further explained this created a toxic environment because so many messages wound up being vague and/or contradictory. Another respondent further recounted how just when they thought the USIG team was making some progress in improving

communication, the group was disbanded while the senior leaders rethought what the team's mission was. This usage of power also illustrates a lack of transparency.

One respondent noted that messages shared by senior leaders "had a tendency to be threatening or unclear." Another participant said more mildly, "Ineffectiveness stems from a climate of non-inclusion generated by some within the front office, from the reluctance of organizational members at all levels to share their information for fear of losing power/prestige by doing so." Perhaps this fear could explain what another respondent had observed,

"P&R leaders must still be forced to share information down within the organization. The organizational culture is one of holding information as a means of control and power. Those with the information tend not to realize that the information is much more powerful if shared to the lowest possible level to ensure consistent execution of an array of initiatives, programs, policies, and actions."

Another participant noted that a lack of transparency negatively impacted leaders' abilities to use power appropriately. Because information was shared in a vacuum, "This, at times, has had senior leaders to present themselves in a bad light to their bosses because their communications work may have influenced other decisions- had anyone known about it."

When asked how internal communication could be improved, all six respondents noted some form of effective power usage or empowerment from senior leaders. Their responses included having good leaders who could effectively do the job (and use their power appropriately), holding leaders more accountable for success, empowerment from the top down, and support and buy-in from all leaders.

As mentioned in the methodology section, I used my participant observation as a guide when looking for themes, but during analysis, I was open to other themes as they emerged. What I found was many more detailed themes on the subject of power. The participants' responses regarding power could be broken down into different categories: sources of power, types of

power, group vs. individual power, and multi-dominant coalition. The responses relating to these themes are highlighted below.

***Sources of power.*** French and Raven (1959) isolated five sources of power. Coercive power includes giving negative reinforcements or exerting punishment. Reward power is hinged on giving something of value to someone. Legitimate power refers to a person's position rather than the person. Expert power is the opposite, based on the person rather than the position. Finally, referent power is someone who is placed in a role model position or someone who is admired. Hackman and Johnson (2009) suggested that both leaders and followers can use different power sources. Each type has costs and benefits that should be weighed before deciding what type of power to use. The authors explain that if one person deems the cost greater than the benefit, the relationship may be ended or redefined (p. 142). Therefore, in order to maintain a good relationship, Hackman and Johnson advocate using expert and referent power in most cases (p. 143).

Respondents observed examples of both legitimate and expert power. Because the respondents for this study were in various positions of power within the organization, it is safe to assume some of them utilized their position to exert power (legitimate) while others their communication expertise and negotiation skills (expert power). One respondent illustrated expert power when explaining how they made others aware of issues that needed to be addressed, "I socialized them with my boss, her boss, and a few more layers above that." A different participant provided a reason behind the need for carefully executing expert power to those in positions of power:

They have the final say, so you have to be aware of what they're thinking and what they want the message to be. If you do not try to capture their view or at least indoctrinate them to the "right" view, then things will not get done.

There was one mention of coercive power, where one respondent noted that when some offices have tried to fill knowledge gaps, they “sometimes get their hands slapped by our OSD PA or LA office” (PA= Public Affairs, LA= Legislative Affairs). There were no mentions of reward power or referent power.

**Relational power.** Berger (2005) discussed three forms of relational power: power over relations, power with relations, and power to relations (pp.15-19). Mumby (1997) described power over relations as a hegemony effect, or, “subordinated groups actively consent to and support belief systems and structures of power relations that do not necessarily serve ... those groups’ interests” (p. 344). This occurs when power structures create an organization world view that everyone in the organization, whether in the dominant coalition or not, accept (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). The asymmetrical model of communication (Grunig, 2001) in public relations applies to this form of power.

Power with relations parallels Grunig’s (2001) two-way symmetrical model of communication in the public relations field. This form of power includes collaboration, cooperation, dialog, and it values relationships over power (Bologh, 1990; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Hartsock, 1981; Rakow, 1989; Shepherd, 1992). Berger (2005) contrasted these two forms of power specifically related to public relations by explaining power over relations includes restricting people’s points of view or inclusion in decision making while power with relations is inclusive and promotes noncoercive decision making processes (p.16).

Power to relations includes resources, processes and approaches a member of an organization will use to resist or counter a dominance model (Berger, 2005, p. 18). The forms of resistance could be unsanctioned (not working with the system) or sanctioned (working with the system). While sanctioned actions may be seen as trying to enhance or advocate functions or

roles, the key here is that the actions are done in the best interests as others. Examples would include education, experience, and knowledge. Spicer (1997) termed these actions “power of performance” and noted they could be used to help practitioners be successful at the table. Another form of sanctioned resistance is developing alliances with others which can lend support to the practitioner. Participants in Berger’s (2005) research described an increase in dialog and then explained how this increased transparency during decision making processes (p. 19).

Unsanctioned resistance includes those actions that are not accepted by the organizational system (Berger, p. 20). Practitioners may be hesitant to utilize these strategies as they could put the person’s job in question, could alienate them from coworkers, and pose ethical dilemmas. Forms of unsanctioned resistance include alternative interpretations, covert actions, association-level activism and whistleblowing. This could include leaking sensitive information, creating communications that oppose dominant communications or participating in the grapevine. Whistleblowing can occur externally or internally. Association-level activism is difficult to find examples of, as Berger noted. However, the author stated they could take the form of establishing working groups to look into power topics, holding classes on political astuteness, or conducting case studies of public relations and power inside dominant coalitions. More radical examples might include holding demonstrations or issuing statements decrying an organization’s power issues (p.22). The three forms of relational power will be explained below.

***Power over relations.*** One participant offered an example of power over relations in P&R. The example illustrates a lack of willingness by those in authority to listen to subordinates and foster a collaborative atmosphere. The respondent described how many in the department felt it important to allow input on which invitations for events should be accepted and who in the Under Secretary’s office should attend. They noted that originally, everyone was on the same

page, but then suddenly things changed (front office refers to those working directly in the Under Secretary's office):

This was originally shared by the front office leadership, then inexplicably suspended. The barriers have been overcome by allowing the front office to do whatever it wants to do with regard to understanding the importance and optics of these outside events, and using my energy more constructively on other endeavors.

This team member wasn't the only one who felt their ideas or contributions were not taken into account, or felt like they had been excluded in decision making processes. One respondent reflected on a time when a plan was created to share information up through the channels to the Under Secretary, and then out to external audiences. When they presented the plan, the senior leader had already chosen someone to head up an official project, and that person rejected the plan the communications team had created. The respondent described that as a result,

Our messages, programs, policies, etc. continue to go up to the Executive Director piecemeal; resulting in misalignment and not taking FULL advantage of the opportunity we have with this initiative to get our programs, policies, etc. communicated out to the world.

Later in the study, a different respondent noted two additional problems when senior leaders exerted their power ineffectively:

Planning StratComm meetings then cancelling them without warning and without rescheduling leaves a void in the knowledge that the leadership possesses. Sending the wrong people- or no one at all- to interagency and cross-agency communications sharing meetings fails to move the organization in the right direction.

***Power with relations.*** There were numerous examples of this form of power relations shared throughout the study. One respondent shared how the team provided options for programs and projects and that they worked with various groups and staff to come up with appropriate strategic communication plans. A different respondent said they were successful

when they persisted at both talking and listening. Another participant described a technique that often produced positive results:

Strategies that worked used the action officer network. When AO's worked together, they could get a lot done. We still had to get info through senior leaders, at times, but if the AO's backed up what we were trying to do, it makes things a lot easier.

**Power to relations.** One respondent described the organization of a group, the P&R Information Exchange Council (P&RIEC), whose mission was to gather and share information with offices throughout P&R- including senior leaders. The creation of this group was intended to overcome a lack of means or power to share information to everyone. Because, as one of the participants stated, "there is still an issue with siloed work in P&R." This team member noted that communication often does not filter down from senior leaders to the communications team, or even the front office.

**Group power vs. individual power.** Some participants noted trying to exert power on their own, while some referred to power exertion as a team effort. For example, one of the participants said: "the team worked with the Chief of Staff to define and message who she was, what her office does, and with whom she should engage." However, three respondents all noted a personal strategic plan they developed, including devising a plan for better information flow, creating a list of talking points to be used by a senior leader to inform and persuade an internal audience, and writing a section devoted to strategic communication for the P&R Strategic Plan (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2011). Overall, however, the ones who noted working as a team often experienced more success than those working alone.

**Multi-dominant coalition.** A theme which arose in several places and in a few different forms is that of competing power, similar to what was discussed in the literature review as multi-

dominant coalition. While empowerment and power with relations provides everyone with a sense of negotiating power, a few of the comments explained what happens if there is not clearly one person in charge. One respondent said:

Working within a team can be difficult. The team has disagreed in front of senior leaders and that can be uncomfortable. As a team we need to have agreed upon a plan before we go talk to someone... and... coming up with an agreed upon strategy.

A different participant noted how they often felt like their ideas were questioned or rejected or had to slowly make their way up the chain for approval. This process often took so long that nothing was ever resolved or accomplished. One participant described how people working with a large communications group sometimes have difficulty coming up with a plan all can agree on:

They wanted to shoe-horn everything into their process, which made it difficult. We were somewhat successful because, in the end, we had a pretty good product, but it still needed work to make sense to everyone reading the plan.

And another respondent noted the discrepancies in who is really in charge of creating and disseminating information:

I find internal strategic communications to be somewhat of a joke, especially at the highest level of the organization... there is still a gap of knowledge with WHO should do that. Is it our public affairs branch? Is it our legislative affairs branch? Unfortunately, OSDLA and OSDPA do not provide all of the support our organization needs.

Summarizing the findings in relation to power, the respondents noted that some strategies worked while others did not. When working as a team, especially as part of the P&RIEC, this power or strength in numbers was more effective in overcoming power imbalances. However, if the person worked as an individual, they were often met with more resistance.

***Overcoming power imbalances.*** The respondents not only spoke about examples of power they observed in P&R, but also about how they try to overcome power imbalances. Many noted it took a lot of patience and tenacity to achieve success. One respondent lamented having to submit and resubmit drafts, “until we got it right!” Another participant explained that often their ideas are rejected by senior leaders, just as in any organization. To overcome this, they touted a need for conveying ideas in such a way that senior leaders would see the value. The respondent also said conviction and reputation were keys to getting senior leaders on board. They continued that strategic communication would never be successful without senior leaders’ support, so they offered this suggestion, “When new leaders come into the organization we need to make it a priority to meet with them and share our mission.”

Some offered suggestions to improving communications such as fixing knowledge gaps with hiring and positioning appropriate personnel, resourcing strategic communication sufficiently, providing enough resources to do the job properly (similar to power dependence where A controls B’s resources, limiting their power), and learning how to avoid crises, rather than perpetually responding to them.

More than one respondent recognized a need for support from those in the top positions, and empowerment from those same people in order to get more cooperation from everyone in the organization. For example, one described some frustration about what role Public Affairs and Legislative Affairs play in creating and disseminating messages. The participant suggested that until senior leadership “champions change” in making sure everyone understands what everyone’s responsibilities are and what their job description entails, there would be perpetual crisis situations.

One respondent suggested something that communications practitioners needed to recognize in order to be more successful. They stated that sometimes the communications team tried to move ahead too far or fast, making decisions “without considering the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order effects.” In other words, similar to a chess game, they didn’t consider what next moves other people might take in response to their decisions. The team overcame this by talking about these possibilities in advance of meetings with senior leaders to enable them to work together better.

A lack of trust and transparency, and unfair power distribution left one respondent feeling a lack of loyalty to the organization:

It is a challenge every day, and it DOES influence me in keeping “one eye open” to the perfect situation- in other words, keeping an eye out for jobs that maybe do not require as much “giving in” or working for organizations that seem to be more advanced in understanding and embracing strategic communications.

Two respondents expressed a mostly positive perspective, despite problems they both mentioned earlier. They both felt their experiences in communications were positive ones. Minus a few people who always seemed to be out to shore up communication efforts, leaving one respondent running in the other direction, they said most of the people they worked with were great and made them feel comfortable with the idea of working with those same people in the future. This shows that they feel these coworkers are trustworthy, thus enhancing their willingness to work with them again.

In summary for this research question, respondents provided a mix of positive and negative examples of power usage. Because senior leaders sometimes were viewed as holding and wielding all the power ultimately in making communication decisions, that left some feeling like either they were not trusted, or that senior leaders could not be trusted, sometimes because of a lack of explanation (or transparency) of their decisions in not allowing strategic

communication efforts to move forward. However, when respondents worked as a team, these power imbalances were often overcome.

To summarize the main themes which arose from the respondent's answers, it can be seen that a lack of trust, lack of transparency, and lack of empowerment and mis-use of power can all impact effectively creating internal strategic communication. It is also evident that participants are working hard to overcome these negative themes to carry out their goals, as supported in the literature. Next we will see how the documents support the goals of effective internal strategic communication and how the themes presented themselves in this body of data.

## **Documents**

This section will share the results of a Google search seeking documents addressing improving internal strategic communication, overcoming trust and transparency issues, and overcoming power relationships in an internal federal government setting. Appendix C shows a list of documents acquired for this comparison. These documents come from others' Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, Google searches for documents with a .gov extension, and searches on the Department of Defense, Personnel and Readiness' public-facing website. Documents acquired through the author's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request will be reported on separately at the end of this section. This section will be broken down by the main themes this study is focusing on: internal strategic communication, trust, transparency, and power, as these were recurring themes in the participants' responses and were recurring during the author's participant observation.

**Strategic communication.** In 2009 Paul (2011) conducted a study comparing the conclusions and recommendations in 36 reports which spoke about improving SC in federal government. He said all of these reports offered very different ideas on how to improve SC, but

there were four themes: better leadership (power), increased resources (a lack of which was mentioned by the participants), clear definition of strategy (going back to needing a grand strategy), and a need for better coordination (which can be helped through better trust and transparency) (p. 8). Many of the reports also recommended some kind of reorganization, although they had different ideas about how and exactly what should be done (p. 9). Paul also noted that although many operations he looked at were on board for improving strategic communication, very few had effectively implemented it. This is very similar to what the current study's respondents and the author experienced in P&R.

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) provided a roadmap to all personnel within the Department of Defense to carry out recommendations by the State Department to improve SC (p. 2). This document defined SC as:

Focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power (p. 3).

While this document's stated intent is for all of DoD, it did focus on a few departments in particular, such as public affairs (PA), but did not include P&R. According to the document, a DoD strategic communication team was formed in August 2006 called Strategic Communication Integration Group (SCIG) whose role was to coordinate internal communication specifically related to interagency communication in DoD (p. 4). This document further set goals to define SC, educate and train leaders, and establish research and metrics protocols (pp. 6-11). The goals and milestones were set extending through September 2009 (pp. 12-22).

The 2010 QDR report had a much broader range of goals and issues to be addressed. The report covered everything from security to Wounded Warriors and strengthening relationships.

Strategic communication was mentioned in this document's goals and objectives. Under the heading "Succeed in counterinsurgency, stability, and counterterrorism operations", the last initiative listed is "Strengthen key supporting capabilities for strategic communication" (p. viii). In an explanation of what this initiative includes, the document lists key areas where SC is needed, including civilian-military efforts, interagency efforts and communication with foreign publics (p. 25). The document further states initiatives increasing language and cultural training will help improve SC (pp. 25, 57). The section concludes by stating that after the President's release of a Congressional report on SC, DoD would research how best to incorporate that report's suggestions (p. 26). This QDR did not go into any detail about how to improve SC. Nor did it reference SCIG as the report from 2006 did. Through a Google search, the author found a blog post (Armstrong, 2008) which reported the SCIG was disbanded in March 2008. Subsequently, a new group was apparently formed in the Public Affairs office at DoD. No information could be found on this new group.

The 2009 Congressional Report, Strategic Communication Science and Technology Plan, references the 2009 Quadrennial Roles and Missions Report which stated that although they were strengthening efforts to improve strategic communication in a public diplomacy arena, resources and leadership might not be sufficient to promote effective interagency SC (p. 5). The 2009 Congressional S&T report also cited recommendations made previously for DoD to better utilize its current resources and increase research to improve SC (p. 6). The report lists things S&T can do to improve SC, including utilizing new technology and new media (p. 7, 10), creating a communication infrastructure, analyzing messages and ideas, performing environmental scanning and forecasting, increasing collaboration, education, empowerment and helping people understand the importance of SC (p. 10).

The document lists examples of programs implemented in other agencies to improve SC. The document also notes a few areas needing further exploration, such as how to apply SC in a global instant information environment (p. 20), applying communication theories such as the magic bullet (pp. 20-21), performing ongoing research and adjustments (p. 21), and looking to other agency's examples for improvements (p. 21).

In February 2011, P&R released its 2012-2016 Fiscal Year Strategic Plan, mentioned briefly earlier in this paper. Strategic Goal 5 from this plan is to "Develop a P&R strategic communication capability, directly aligned and partnering with the Services and COCOMs" (p. A-1). The only "strategy guidance" (P. A-2) they give for this goal is to "Communicate and collaborate with all stakeholders- internal and external to the Department" (p. A-3). No further plan is laid out, at least in this document, of how to implement improved SC.

**Trust.** Unfortunately, not as much focus was placed specifically on trust or transparency in the documents found for this study, but what the author did find is documented below.

In the 2006 QDR (Deputy Secretary of Defense, 2006) report, one of the problems DoD sought to address and overcome was: "Effective communication by the United States must build upon coordinated actions and information at all levels of the USG to maintain credibility and trust." They said in order to address this, there must be an increase in transparency, accuracy, timeliness, and consistency. It further stated that doing this would ensure credibility, thus making it possible to advance the nation's interests.

**Transparency.** Christopher Paul (2011) noted that one aspect of the disagreement over how to clearly define strategic communication arises from how transparent to make the message. On one end of the spectrum are those who believe every message should be tightly controlled, delivered in wrote fashion, so that the same three talking points are shared by everyone. The

other extreme is that anyone can say whatever they want- which gives the potential for conflicting messages and inaccuracies. Paul contends that there should be a happy medium in this dichotomy (p. 3).

**Power.** In order to find more documents pertaining to power, the document search was expanded to include other Department of Defense offices as not many documents were found pertaining exclusively to Personnel and Readiness. Most of the documents found dealt with foreign relations, or communication with external audiences. For example, one document prepared by the National Science and Technology Council (National Science and Technology Council, 2008) focused on developing strategies to understand power relationships in external groups mostly outside the United States in order to better research, communicate, and develop stabilizing measures for volatile areas. Another document drafted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) discussed power relationships related to gender-based violence in countries experiencing an AIDS epidemic (Doggett, 2010).

Christopher Paul (2011) noted that another disagreement involving defining strategic communication is agreeing on whether the purpose of SC is to inform or influence (which would be the difference between power with relations and power over relations, respectively). Paul again suggests a need for balance- professionals should admit that all messages have some influence in them, however, they should also be credible, truthful, and should contain “virtuous persuasion” (p.4). He suggested that leaders could better utilize their power by building strategic communication both top down and bottom up (p.18).

The 2006 Congressional Report pointed out that in order to improve strategic communication, all agencies must work together (power with relations in the literature). They state the way to do this is for leaders to support these efforts, something the participants also

desired, but did not see. The SCIG was formed to overcome some of these barriers, but as explained earlier, the group was eventually disbanded.

The 2009 Congressional Report, Strategic Communication Science and Technology Plan, was drafted in response to tasking from the Armed Services Committee to integrate SC into Science and Technology (S&T) (p. 3). It states, “Recent operations provide numerous real world examples of the increasing power to be derived from the adroit shaping of military operations to influence world opinions and perceptions” (p. 4). It continues later on that the best defense is to use “smart power” rather than “hard power” to communicate (p. 7). This report analyzes what was being done with SC in DoD and what gaps existed that could help formulate a plan for S&T. It also mentions empowering the right people to do the job (p. 16). They later explain that in order to communicate effectively, organizations need to work together, not alone (p. 17). In other words, “power comes from connectedness.” (p. 22) On a smaller level, that also meant making sure people get the education they need to feel empowered to contribute (p. 18).

P&R’s 2012-2016 Fiscal Year Strategic Plan includes the following vision statement:

A bold, empowered organization committed to the development of the Total Force, actively shaping the environment and embracing selfless service to the defense of our nation (p. 2)

No further plan or detail is given on how to empower personnel, however.

### **Documents Acquired Through FOIA Request**

Because so few documents were sent for this portion of the study, this section will be organized to illustrate the information from each document separately, rather than split into categories.

In response to a FOIA request the author sent to the Department of Defense in November 2011 for documents discussing strategic communication and/or diversity, four documents were

sent in response. A list of these documents is provided in Appendix D. Although three of the four are primarily focused on diversity initiatives, there are sections applicable to this thesis. The author previously conducted a study testing whether diversity initiatives were hindering internal strategic communication, and the overwhelming response was that no, it was not. All the respondents agreed in that study that power was more of an issue (Seeley, 2011b).

Two of the FOIA documents touched on the subject of empowerment and enabling in regards to communication. For example, in the article titled “Strength through Diversity”, CAPT Kenneth Barrett, Deputy Director of The Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity (ODMEO) was quoted saying that in order “to remain a leader in this world, DoD needs to value and utilize its assets... We must empower each member of the Total Force to be creative and implement effective change to meet the challenges of future threats. We must empower them to innovate” (p. 1). He continued that encouraging diversity was the key to improving innovation. The article shares an example of a group of soldiers in Afghanistan needing to de-ice a runway, and not being able to wait for the requisition request to go through for a special machine. The article shares how the group worked together, coming to a solution in a couple of days, rather than the months the requisition would have taken. This is an example of the group conducting a sanctioned power to relations effort. It also illustrates how working in a team produced a positive result. Further on in the article, the author suggested the need of “building structures to facilitate the exchange of ideas, and basic communication inherent to leadership, is something that experts agree is vital to Diversity, Inclusion and ultimately performance” (p. 4). This is an example of building a structure, or culture empowering others to create effective internal communication strategies.

The next article, titled “What is ‘Inclusion?’” goes into more detail about building an appropriate structure to facilitate better communication. The article projects that if the Total Force is to be ready for anything that may come their way, DoD needs to be inclusive and “expand environments where people not only feel empowered to forward ideas, they can know that their ideas will be listened to as well as heard... having free communication is a key to inclusion” (p. 9). The author suggested what may hinder empowerment, inclusion, and communication most is tradition, “The ‘way it is always been done’ becomes the standard for the way things always should be” (p. 9). While there have been many champions throughout United States history whose tactics were successful, “In some cases, however, they enable sources of resistance” (p. 9). The article noted that others later replicated strategies from those pioneers—George Washington and Chesty Puller, for example, did things that went against traditions of their time. They were often ridiculed for their efforts, then praised by later generations. The article continues that these pioneers established environments of welcoming new ideas, and so should today’s leaders. They noted a Gallup poll which indicated companies who put employee engagement (and empowerment) at the top of their list saw much better productivity and safety. In fact, quality was 60% higher in those companies who valued two-way communication. The article concluded by saying that while not possible to include all new ideas, empowering personnel “with resources, training and information to perform their work” (p. 10) will improve things overall.

The third document, “Improve Communication to Facilitate Inclusion” took a slightly different approach to empowering employees, and that was from a leadership standpoint in providing positive feedback, forums for discussing ideas, and utilizing reward power, something not noted by any of the respondents. While much of the article’s contents were not relevant to

the current study, there was one line which related, “Communication obviously is harder to facilitate when not knowing who to communicate with” (p. 2). This was a sentiment expressed numerous times by the respondents in not knowing whose responsibility it was so create and distribute communications, something that arises in a multi-dominant coalition, as P&R could be described.

The final document was information about the P&RIEC, which includes members of the various offices within P&R, many of which were communication specialists in their offices. The purpose of the group was to overcome the rigid structure and enable information sharing vertically and horizontally within the organization (similar to power to relations). The group also hoped that by improving internal strategic communication, they would also be better able to share information with external stakeholders. The goals included sharing highlights from each office of what programs they were working on, communicating messages from and to the Under Secretary and senior leaders and staying current on media activity highlighting issues relevant to their offices- or being able to anticipate trends or issues that the department should be concerned with. The five page document included both short and long-term goals including improving technological communication efforts, making the Under Secretary more visible (transparent) to personnel, and streamlining information flow. The six month review noted that while much progress had been made, some efforts had been tabled indefinitely, while new issues had arisen. The overall conclusion though, was that the formation of P&RIEC was in fact carrying out its mission- facilitating communication and empowering people to be involved in this process.

The author contacted the lead person for the P&RIEC to determine if a one year review had been conducted. They forwarded a few emails about changes being made to the responsibilities of this communication sharing team. During the author’s internship (which will

be explained in greater detail in the next section), the author lead an effort to form a strategic plan to improve the internal web portal to facilitate better communication. The portal at that time was not accessible to everyone in P&R, especially those working outside the Pentagon. Through research and forging relationships with other offices that had already gone through this process, it was determined the ideal would be to upgrade to SharePoint 2010. Before leaving the internship, the author also developed a plan for a governance structure that would need to be developed to populate and keep the internal portal updated over time, similar to what another office had done.

The emails the group's leader sent shared plans for finally getting SharePoint 2010 and for the P&RIEC team to be that governance structure. Through the author's research, it was determined that creating a governance structure to run the portal using SharePoint 2010 was the best formula for facilitating timely, accurate information sharing throughout P&R. Not only that, but one of the emails was from a senior leader who offered his support and backing for these changes. These developments illustrate ongoing efforts to improve communication and break down the structural boundaries previously discouraging information flow.

To summarize all of the documents analyzed in this section, they have some of the same themes as the literature and participant responses. In order to have better internal strategic communication, there needs to be an increase in trust, transparency, and appropriate use of power, including empowerment from senior leaders to subordinates to do their jobs. Do the participant responses and documents really give an accurate picture of what was/is happening in P&R if it were observed by an outsider? The next section will share the author's perspective.

### **Participant Observation**

From my experiences, I observed many of the same things occurring in the office of P&R as the respondents described. I noted that trust and transparency was greatly lacking, that power often seemed to be the cause of much frustration to the communication teams, but also the desire by many to improve internal strategic communication was a shared vision of the future, something the documents all agreed on. Each of these recurring themes from this study will be addressed in this section from the view of my participant observation.

**Strategic communication.** During my internship, I conducted a research study for the department in preparation for an intranet overhaul. The purpose was to determine what people wanted/needed on the internal website so a plan could be devised before actually putting it together. The fact that this research was being carried out was also evidence that the desire for better SC was certainly present. The results from this study overwhelmingly showed that people wanted better communication throughout the department. Many felt like they did not know what was going on in the cubicle next to theirs, let alone across the hall or on the next floor.

Along with personnel's show of frustration, however, I also noted many people who volunteered to help in these efforts of better communication. Some said they would help with the intranet overhaul, others said they would love to learn what was and wasn't appropriate to share so communication could improve. This mirrored what the strategic communication team was trying to accomplish. They were both trying to communicate more effectively with all personnel, and also train people on the importance of SC and on how to communicate better. Specifically, during many of the P&RIEC and other meetings I attended, much time was spent on sharing dates and topics of events through a new calendar. Group leaders also asked questions, such as what would you like to know about, and what would you like others to know about?

In my observations, there seemed to be many more people who wanted to improve internal strategic communication, than those who did not. But again, while I was exposed to many people within the organization by being on a strategic communication team, there were still many people who I did not interact with. My coworkers sometimes spoke of people they had difficulty communicating with, but overall, it still seemed to be more of a prevalent idea that everyone wanted to improve communication.

**Trust/Transparency.** I often heard people say they did not trust that the senior leadership was sharing all the information it could with them. Despite their understanding that some things were top secret and could not be shared, they still felt like many things that could be shared, were not. That also made many people hesitant to approach their senior leaders to either ask questions or to share information that could be helpful to others. They just did not trust that the information sharing would happen.

I can recall quite a few times where my co-workers tried to share information with their boss in hopes that the information would ultimately reach the senior leaders. But quite often, the information did not get passed along. This made my co-workers not only mistrust their immediate supervisor, but also the top leaders in the organization.

In their defense, I also spoke to some of those senior leaders. They have extremely constricting schedules which did not always allow sufficient information sharing. For the mid-level manager, it was often difficult for them to decide what the most important issues were to present, as well as their dilemma on how to present the information so the senior leader would listen and act on their suggestions. Many of the respondents also mentioned similar struggles, both for themselves as well as observations they had made in others. This lack of transparency,

or lack of sharing information, ultimately affected their trust in each other, as well as the ability to execute good internal strategic communication.

**Power.** I observed many in the organization trying to overcome power barriers, just as the documents analyzed suggested one in a communication position should do. Many leaders were trying to empower certain people and groups to make internal communication a priority. Unfortunately, I also observed many who shared a frustration- they still felt like no information was getting in or out, despite these efforts. Information seemed to stop at the senior leader level and did not go anywhere. Another major problem I observed was that no one felt empowered to make SC decisions. They often were not sure who to ask to make those decisions so projects could proceed. They also wondered if all their hard work was for nothing, as senior leaders often disapproved of their efforts to craft appropriate messages.

These frustrations were a result of some personnel not knowing or understanding how to work within established DoD protocols. Everything had to be approved through the front office first. If SC decisions were not approved by the front office before launching, there was often push-back because something wasn't done correctly or was duplicated. Those trying to share information were going off of what limited information they had, which often precipitated a negative outcome.

I also observed that various personnel's communication styles seemed to depend on what office they were in, or more specifically, which office they were trained and mentored in. Those working in an office or under supervisors with communication backgrounds were more transparent than those who worked in offices without communication professionals. Their leaders empowered them more to share information. As a result, these personnel were more willing to share information about projects in their office with others, where appropriate. The

personnel in a particular office were expected to respect the level of information sharing the boss allowed (something that would probably be observed in any organization.). The frustration came when everyone was allowed a different level of information sharing depending on the office. People often got moved around to different offices as well, which created confusion about what was and was not acceptable to share.

Another phenomenon the author observed during her internship was a near para-social relationship (Horton, & Wohl, 1956) many of those in P&R experienced with the Under Secretary. Personnel had limited access to the Under Secretary- in fact, most of them never had any contact with him. What little they knew came from his blogs, emails, and his bio on the DoD website- or sometimes from rumors. The Under Secretary knew very few of the personnel very well outside of his front office, mostly because of his extremely busy schedule. This made communication efforts even more difficult. Efforts were launched to improve this deficiency, but never became a regular occurrence. This tight restriction of power left many in the department with a lack of transparency and trust, which made it more difficult to communicate concerns or ideas.

Coming into the department as an intern, I had the advantage of not knowing about the existing power structures, nor was it immediately explained to me how difficult it was to get things done, often because of needing to go through the correct channels. In the beginning, I jumped right in, contacting senior leaders in regards to my project, trying to forge relationships, and get support for devising strategies. Many commented on my approach, saying how wonderful it was, not just because I was an intern, but because I was fearless! I did not really understand what they meant until I was really trying to get as much done as possible before my internship ended. It was so difficult to get anyone to commit to champion my project, or getting

people to support my efforts. I was once told in response to a request to gather some information, “Um, can you give me six months?” This was because one often had to get the senior leader’s approval before sharing information. Senior leaders were all very busy, much of their days taken up by endless meetings. I slowly began to see what these communication members were describing... and I experienced the same frustrations as they did. I knew things needed to be improved, partially from my own observations, and partially from talking to many personnel who also wanted to see changes and improvements. My requests for commitments of help were often met with, well, we will have to get approval from this person, and this office, and that person...

To conclude this section, we can see that the respondents’ responses, documents, and the author’s participant observations all support each other. All express frustration at the lack of internal strategic communication. All noted a lack of trust and transparency. And all expressed difficulty in overcoming the existing power structure to try and facilitate change. The existing literature will be used to help explain why these themes were visible in P&R in the next section.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

From this exploratory case study, it has been noted that respondents in P&R, documents, and the author's participant observation had similar themes. All share a desire to improve internal strategic communication, increase trust and transparency, and break through power barriers. The respondents and the author confirm what the literature says: without trust, transparency, and proper power balances, internal communication suffers. This section pairs up the existing literature to the results to explain why a lack of trust and transparency and an abundance of power imbalances are all having a negative impact on internal strategic communication. This explanation will help answer the main question of this thesis: why internal strategic communication improvement efforts do not seem to be very effective. This section will also address additional theory not already discussed in this paper which could be beneficial to explaining why strategic communication efforts were not improving as rapidly as communication practitioners in P&R were hoping.

### **Strategic Communication**

When looking specifically at strategic communication, all of the respondents, the author, and the documents recognized the significance of having good internal strategic communication. The literature supports the need for an overall strategic communication plan being built into the organization's structure. Hoover (2010) touted the need for incorporating communication strategy into the overall grand strategy, not just including it as an afterthought. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2006) broke strategic communication into three parts: grand strategy, strategy, and tactics. Grand strategy takes place at the corporate level and molds communication to the company's vision, goals, etc. Strategy is conducted at the next level down and seeks to utilize resources to carry out grand strategy. Tactics are the actions taken to meet the strategic goals.

Many respondents described instances where they have participated in developing strategies to convey various messages to internal audiences, following the vision of the P&R Strategic Plan (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2011). However, where Hoover (2010) suggested strategic communication should “synchronize organizational units and align resources to deliver a common core message (p. 54),” many of the responses reflected a lack of consistency and explained difficulties in sharing a unified message. One of the respondents in particular noted how communications were often simply reacting to crises, which was contrary to what Hoover suggested as the ideal. Hoover suggests four key components make up a good communication strategy. These are: a rationale (or purpose) statement; situational analysis (what needs to be changed and why-this includes core values and vision); goals and objectives; and key stakeholders, the message, and the media. The documents, respondents’ comments and participant observation all confirm P&R does have a purpose statement, goals and objectives, are slowly empowering key stakeholders, are slowly getting out the messages through the P&RIEC, and are starting to utilize new technologies to share their messages. The problem came in getting those strategies approved and empowering personnel to launch the tactics that would ultimately follow the approved plans.

Asif and Sargeant (2000) suggested that a culture needs to exist supporting good internal communication in order for it to be successful. As was evidenced from the respondents, some people were on board with changing the culture and supporting SC, while others were not. From the author’s observations, the differences in how much information was acceptable to share with others varied across offices and therefore made it difficult to form a universal culture supporting information sharing. Just as Dolphin (2005) noted, sending and receiving inaccurate, duplicated, and/or mixed messages and not having a similar communication strategy caused frustration and

decreased trust and transparency in P&R. Respondents in a study conducted by Dolphin (2005) noted internal communication was key during a time when their organization was facing many changes. The respondents in this study noted how senior leaders had changed often in recent years. The literature therefore explains why trust and transparency suffered during these transitional times- because there wasn't good internal strategic communication. Grimshaw and Barry (2008) suggested that a lack of good internal communication leads to strained loyalty. As noted, one respondent said they were keeping their options open after what they had experienced in P&R. This reaction could further be explained by looking at the literature on trust.

### **Trust**

As the respondents noted, trust is often the casualty of poor internal communication strategy, especially when there is a lack of transparency. Many described people in the organization who could be trusted and who they felt comfortable approaching to discuss communication strategies, while others did not garner as much trust. Similar to what Christen (2004) noted in their research, team members were more willing to negotiate communication strategy with those they found trustworthy (or who could be depended on to follow through). Respondents described how senior leaders were known to change their minds on accepting, supporting, and launching communication strategy, which in turn decreased trust in senior leaders.

Steyn (2007) explained the role strategic communication practitioners hold in an organization in helping everyone build trust in upper management. Because they are responsible for facilitating communication throughout the organization, it is important for them to have characteristics of being open, dependable, reliable, and accurate in their information sharing. During the author's internship, the team communicated with the organization as a whole that they

were trying to improve communication by taking their questions, getting answers from the powers that be, and then posting that information in a place where everyone could have access to it. As one of the respondents noted however, ultimately, senior leaders quashed that idea and the answers to the questions were never released. The literature would suggest this act decreased personnel's level of trust in both the communications team as well as in senior leaders. It would also make it more difficult to get participation from personnel if a similar strategy was tried in the future. The respondents and participant observation noted examples of inconsistency, finger pointing, micromanaging, and secrecy, just as Hackman & Johnson (2009) did, all of which can undermine trust. The literature can help in finding a solution to regain trust, although it is often a difficult undertaking. Hackman and Johnson suggested doing the following: determine what happened, determine the extent of the loss of trust, own up to actions that caused the loss, and determine what to do to rebuild trust (pp. 255-256). Another good way to rebuild trust is through good communication (p. 256). Unfortunately, no good procedures were clearly stated and available for people in P&R to use to overcome trust barriers. Another factor found in this study and in the literature as affecting trust is transparency, which will be supported from the literature in the next section.

### **Transparency**

Hackman & Johnson (2009), Williams (2005), and Rawlins (2008) all suggested trust could be improved by increased transparency. This commodity also seemed to be in short supply based on the respondent's comments and the author's observations. Unfortunately, a lack of upward, downward, and inward transparency often prevailed, despite efforts from communication team members and others in the organization to improve information flow.

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for an open government are transparency, collaboration, and participation. It says, “Transparency promotes accountability by providing the public with information about what the Government is doing” (second paragraph). A public website was created which shares government information (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/open>). There is a blog, dashboard, gallery, and information for the public to access.

It can be seen, from the creation of the P&RIEC team, and the desires of many personnel members in P&R that increased transparency is on their to-do list. However, as this study has already noted, many in the department were confused about who should be saying what, and how much should be said.

Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins (2007) suggested transparency was the glue holding together good internal strategic communication plans in a government setting. Without it, everything else falls apart. While the respondents and author noted more success occurred in creating and implementing internal strategic communication strategy with an increase in transparency, one element that these authors did not consider was that of power, which will be explained in the next section.

## **Power**

One of the largest and most-repeated themes from the participants, and of which the author observed many times, was that of a lack of empowerment. Many respondents felt powerless to make positive changes in the department. Grunig and his associates as well as other researchers (Grunig, Dozier & Broom, 1995; Toth & Cline, 1989; Toth & Hon, 2001) have found many reasons as to why public relations professionals are often not empowered by senior leaders. They suggest lack of education or professional expertise (which the respondents confirmed in their statements), inexperience or naiveté of organizational power relations or

politics (also noted by the respondents), passivity, gender, longevity, role perceptions, lack of managerial experience (again, a theme which arose in the respondents' comments), structural and cultural factors can all hinder public relations professionals from being included. With specific regards to culture, Grunig et al. (2002) found that senior leaders who fostered a climate in word and deed supporting communication and offered equal opportunities to both genders and various races were also more likely to include public relations professionals at the table. While the respondents noted in the author's earlier research that senior leaders did foster diversity and inclusion, putting the same amount of effort into fostering empowerment and supporting the strategic communications team wasn't as apparent.

The participants in this study often noted how they felt decisions about strategic communication were out of their hands, or expressed confusion over who should be heading up communication decisions, similar to what Berger (2005) described in a multi-dominant coalition. Because of the unique structure of P&R, some respondents felt like their ideas had to go through many layers with little success. However, most of the respondents were willing to keep working towards the end goal and keep trying to break through the power barriers to be successful. While some decided to continue doing what they were doing, others gave up, and still others continue trying power to relations strategies. The author also noted that some of the participants seemed more at ease with trying to work through the existing system while others were not. Some did feel empowerment to head up groups to improve communications, and pass that empowerment along to others. Perhaps this illustrates that P&R is similar to any organization, where a matter of give and take is necessary. Perhaps the perspective of how much give is necessary to your strategy's success depends on where in the leadership hierarchy you fall.

Berger (2005) offered another possible explanation for why practitioners are excluded- in that sometimes how and where meetings take place are changed without telling communication professionals (p. 11). This wreaks havoc on one's ability to stay up-to-date on what decisions are being made, and disallows everyone from having an opportunity to provide input. Dahl (1957) and Pfeffer (1981) described power as being a relationship between people rather than something a person possesses. A person therefore is only powerful in relation to other people in a specific setting. So if communication professionals are not given any power from those they are with, they may not have power in that setting, but might in another. Hence why the communications professionals questioned for the current study were able to share information with people on equal ground as them, but often could not send or receive information from senior leaders.

The author heard many times from the team members that they were slowly being integrated into more meetings held by the dominant coalition so they could be more involved- something Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) noted is a challenge for many public relations practitioners. While this was a step in the right direction, there was still work needed in empowering the communications team to then make decisions and carry out those decisions, something also touted as a good thing by the authors. So far, every communication decision still had to be approved by the dominant coalition. This could be seen by the examples of power over relations expressed by the respondents as well as the examples of power to relations.

While everything analyzed in this study notes agreement on the need for excellent internal strategic communication, improved trust and transparency, and more empowerment, the one thing that everyone does not seem to agree on is how to go about improvements. While the team has been trying to overcome power barriers, and have experienced some success, there is

still much work to be done. Grimshaw and Barry (2008) offered some suggestions that might help the USIG or P&RIEC teams more successfully tackle internal communication. They first suggested senior leaders often do not know what internal strategic communication looks like, and if they do, they assume no one in their organization does either. The respondents observed this very thing happening in P&R. Grimshaw and Barry also suggested leaders sometimes see current communication team members as people who only know how to organize a town hall meeting, create a power point presentation, or write a memo (p. 28). The authors posed this question: “Would not it be faster and more efficient if the field could speak more directly, collectively, and objectively to senior leaders about what a ‘strategic’ internal communication looks like” (pp. 28-29)? This question brought them to develop the Strategic Communication Maturity Model (SCMM), discussed earlier in this paper.

Researchers and professionals have not come up with a solid strategy for overcoming power imbalances or those situations where the costs outweigh the benefits. Finding a solution is an ongoing process. Many researchers agree this is a worthwhile endeavor. L. A. Grunig (1992) suggested if the dominant coalition is willing to share its power the organization will be better capable of adapting to changing environments. Classic approaches included telling people about the value of public relations and have relied on accreditation and measurement initiatives (Berger, 2007). There is some research to support Excellence Theory’s suggestions of educating professionals, helping them gain more expertise and experience and instilling in them a strong ethical orientation of the managerial role as being effective, something of which many of the respondents also voiced (Grunig et al., 2002). Hackman and Johnson (2009) recommended sharing power and empowering others would increase a person’s power (p. 147). Berger and Reber (2006) took a critical approach and suggested professionals try resistance activities such as

advocacy, activism, and dissent to those who do not support them in order to break through power barriers. Berger (2007) also suggested using a combination of strategies, but also suggested public relations professionals needed to understand power relationships and be willing to engage in sometimes confrontational power struggles during decision making processes (p. 230).

During these power struggles, Emerson (1962) proposed the theory of power dependence, which is that for group or individual A to exert power over group or individual B, much is dependent on the A's control over B's resources, which then causes B to depend on A. If these dependencies are out of balance, there is an imbalance of control. The respondents for this study noted numerous times how they felt a lack of resources was greatly limiting their ability to execute successful internal strategic communication.

To look at this aspect of power control from a different angle, Berger (2005) noted that the absence or presence of the leader of the dominant coalition impacted the decision making process. Even when the chief leader (in this study, often the CEO) was not present, decisions still had to be approved by them. So, one person, acting as messenger, often relayed a briefing to the CEO of the proposal. This frustrated public relations practitioners because they often felt their concerns on matters were watered down and not given due importance (p. 12). Therefore, not only did the CEO hold decision making power, but the messenger also held substantial power.

Christen (2004) suggested perceived power could impact the ability to negotiate. When a group is working on a strategic communication plan, negotiating the strategy is a necessary part of the process. From the author's experience, that negotiation process occurs not just with team members, but also with upper levels of leadership. The respondents in this study noted that

although they find it harder to work with people they do not trust and who they perceive as being difficult to work with, they either avoided that person, or made the best of a bad situation.

Christen's findings suggested a negative relationship between perceived power of a group and a willingness to negotiate with them, which supports what the respondents said (p. 255). In addition, the data suggested a relationship existed between an organization or group perceiving themselves as more powerful than the group they were negotiating with and their willingness to negotiate (p. 256). Christen further suggested trustworthiness may be one way to counteract the negative effects of perceived power (p. 256).

Berger (2005) discovered there are numerous checkpoints on the way to getting approval by the dominant coalition, and seldom are decisions final. In a complex organization, there are many departments and offices involved in the decision making process, thus making it easier for people's voices to be heard, but also making it difficult for everyone to come to a consensus. This spread of power creates a "multiple-dominant coalition". All of the respondents noted the difficulty of getting through these check points to get their communication strategies approved. This also makes it difficult to have complete trust that the senior leader will be making decisions that benefit everyone, in addition to running the risk of decreasing transparency. Because there is often constant tweaking to what the professional thought was an agreed-upon decision, trust in this process is diluted (p. 13). Because these documents are always changing, it is difficult for the public relations professional to create deliverables that the dominant coalition truly wants. This lack of transparency makes a practitioner's job frustrating and more difficult.

All of this literature offers support to why internal strategic communication improvements are struggling in P&R. It can be seen that the literature supports what the respondents noted, what documents note, and what the author experienced in her internship.

Following Yin (2009a)'s suggestion to exhaust all possible explanations, the rest of this section will discuss theory not included in the literature review that could help foster better strategic communication, trust, transparency, and a greater balance of power.

### **Cultural Approach to Organizations Theory**

Cultural approach to organizations theory (Geertz, 1973) suggested that communication weaves webs of meaning in an organization, so much so that people may get caught in the same old web without being able to break free. The current study set out to take a closer look at power relationships, to try and break through that web- perhaps cut a hole in it so that progress can be made.

The participants noted occurrences similar to what the author observed during her internship- information often flows from the top down, and seems to stop at a certain level so others who should have access to information do not. This information sharing is also stopped at a certain level when trying to move information from the bottom up. It often gets lost in the organizational structure, and those with more power decide what should and should not move on- which it would appear is a very limited amount of information, even sometimes inaccurate or outdated.

### **Persuasion Theories**

Perhaps another avenue to look at with respect to overcoming these power barriers is to remember that the field of public relations is built on many theories of persuasion. From the participants' responses, it would seem they are trying to utilize these various theories to overcome power imbalances. For example, the basic persuasion model suggests in order to change one's attitude about an issue, it is necessary to change beliefs and values surrounding that

issue. Many of the participants noted techniques of sharing information in order to help senior leaders understand the value in a particular issue.

**The elaboration likelihood model (ELM).** This explains that attitude changes are more likely to happen if the message goes through the central processing route rather than the peripheral route (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). The arguments need to be strong and can be successful whether objective or biased. While the participants seemed to be attempting to ensure a message goes through the central route by doing things like reminding the person of the message, increasing the immediacy of the message, and showing confidence when presenting their ideas and suggestions, there could be other factors hindering the messages from going through this more successful route. For example, one participant described how one of the communication team members was often wearing multiple hats, requiring focus and concentration on multiple job responsibilities at once. From the author's observations, many people within P&R were on three different committees, had multiple responsibilities, and were working on multiple projects at once. This made response time extremely slow, and I am sure it made it difficult for them to really give their full attention to any one issue. This would increase the likelihood of persuasive messages being processed through the peripheral route. This means the person would be more likely to be easily persuaded by everyone coming to them with persuasive messages, and would make it difficult to make a decision on the best course of action. This would help explain why response times were so long on many of the communication messages the team tried to push through, and why they were often met with little success in influencing attitude change.

**Inoculation Theory.** It was apparent that some of the respondents had tried an approach similar to that described in inoculation theory. In a meta-analysis on this theory, researchers

discovered that inoculation messages were more successful than supportive messages or nothing at all in bestowing resistance (Banas, Rains, 2012). One participant expressed frustration when they approached a senior leader with an idea, but found someone had beaten them to the punch, so that their ideas were not listened to or implemented. Many said it was imperative to talk to a new leader right away to express their goals. The author notes that during her internship, it seemed to be that whoever got the ear of the Under Secretary first got him to listen to their idea. Whoever planted the seed was more likely to be successful in convincing the senior leader that their idea was the best. Yet the author also observed the difficulty in getting an audience with the Under Secretary because of his packed schedule. The communications team had difficulty getting in to see him on a regular basis, a goal he had expressed upon their creation. It therefore became difficult for them to inoculate him with their persuasive messages.

### **Strength in Numbers**

An underlying message throughout the responses seemed to be that of strength in numbers. Many noted it was a great advantage in sharing a persuasive message that successfully persuaded senior leaders and garnered their support. Groups like the P&RIEC and AO network seemed to be more successful with sharing information, especially horizontally. From the responses, research, and observations, I believe it is safe to conclude the best way to really have effective internal strategic communication when it comes to changing attitudes and beliefs amongst those top levels which carry the most power is to make sure senior leaders are at the table and fully stand-behind, encourage, and help facilitate communication efforts. It would also be helpful to have a good handle on who the senior leaders really are, which issues are most important to them, and be familiar with each person's unique communication style. For

example, one person may be persuaded by emotional appeals while another may need a more logical approach.

### **Social Penetration Theory**

Knowing how to approach a senior leader in order to build that relationship could receive some help by looking at Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory (1973). These researchers compared people to onions, in that in order to get to the innermost layer, housing one's attitudes, it is necessary to peel away each layer through a process of self-disclosure. Do the senior leaders and communication practitioners know one another well enough to disclose what their strongly held attitudes are such that persuasive messages can be effectively crafted in order to negotiate strategic communication? One element of this theory is reciprocity. If one party is not giving as much disclosure as the other one, the person not being communicated to may get frustrated and stop trying. This is because of a lack of trust, which is often built early in the relationship. Again, this might support the success of approaching a senior leader early on in their new position to begin this process of building trust- before someone else does with inaccurate information.

To summarize this section, and pull together all sources used in triangulating this study, a few themes emerged universally from each source.

1. Better internal strategic communication is a necessary component of a successful organization. Without it, there is a loss of productivity, duplication of efforts, and loss of money, and possibly the risk of losing good personnel.
2. There is a lack of trust both from senior leaders and personnel. Personnel do not trust that senior leaders are sharing all the information that is appropriate to share. Senior leaders on the other hand do not seem to trust that personnel can either handle the

information appropriately, or that communication professionals can do their job. This lack of trust decreases the ability to execute effective internal communication strategies.

3. Transparency, closely intertwined with trust, is also a missing commodity in P&R. Senior leaders often change their minds about what information can be shared, and then since nothing is shared, this decreases trust, which then decreases communication. The literature supports that if transparency and trust are low, communication sharing will also be low.
4. One element which is not discussed in the documents about improving strategic communication, but which came up repeatedly in the respondent's answers, as well as was often observed in the author's participant observation was a lack of empowerment and an inappropriate use of power. Many people did not know who was in charge. Many felt like no communication moved up or down, so they did not know how to try and improve communication. Respondents felt like they often just had to go with the flow and let the leaders decide, rather than trying to make sure effective communication strategies were accepted, supported, and launched. This lack of empowerment decreased trust and transparency, which then decreased internal strategic communication.
5. Despite all of these road blocks to effective communication, it was also evident that respondents were trying hard to improve internal strategic communication by increasing trust and transparency and overcoming power imbalances.

Now what does all this mean and how does it answer the main question set forth by this research study? The answer will be discussed in the following conclusion section.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The main question this paper asked was why, despite a strong desire to improve internal strategic communication efforts, was strong improvement not evident in the Office of Personnel and Readiness in the Department of Defense. The existing literature helped us understand that without sufficient trust and transparency, empowerment and effective use of power, internal strategic communication would not improve as quickly as hoped for, and would ultimately cause much frustration across the department. These ideas support the recurring themes in the respondent comments, documents, and participant observation. Internal strategic communication efforts were not improving as rapidly as communication professionals hoped because there was a lack of trust, transparency, empowerment, and appropriate use of power. The study also brought to light some other factors that warrant further research, such as using persuasion theories, inoculation theory, cultural approach to organizations theory and social penetration theory.

Just as Yin (2009b) suggested, this exploratory case study shows that in an effort to answer the why, we can see just how complicated a phenomenon this is. The purpose of this research is to provide a snapshot of one case- the office of P&R in the Department of Defense and to show what is happening there in regards to internal strategic communication. Other organizations who are experiencing the same problems can take these observations and continue the research to determine what factors may be hindering SC there.

### **Future Research**

Participants in this study came from different experience levels, time working at DoD, and sat in different levels of the power structure, but no senior leaders were included. Getting their perspective would be beneficial. Future research should include people from all levels of the organization, especially helpful in garnering a well-rounded observation of power.

Future research should also look at specific persuasion theories within a public relations context and how those could best overcome the themes which arose from this study. While most of the literature tackling supervisor/subordinate relationships focuses on negotiation, providing positive feedback, etc., not much is available in the literature to specifically address using persuasive theories to overcome power imbalances in order to precipitate internal communication strategies. Further research should also specifically look at federal government work environments where there is a strong military presence, as a gap in the literature still exists in this sector of the workforce. The rigid military power structure changes the dynamics in this unique environment.

Future research should also include more longitudinal studies. The Department of Defense specifically has experienced many changes since the author's internship and is likely to go through another round of changes as more budget cuts are asked for, and depending on who is elected as our next President of the United States. If President Obama is not re-elected, all those serving as political appointees will be released from their positions. This constant influx makes it difficult to build lasting trust and develop effective communication strategies if power is shifting and leaders are changing.

A limitation of this study was using a qualitative survey method to gather responses. Part of the reasoning for this was to increase anonymity for the respondents. However, there were a few responses that could have been fleshed out with more in-depth information if follow up questions had been asked. An additional limitation for this study was a lack of documents used by members of the USIG team and/or the author during her internship. Because this case study focuses in on one office in the Department of Defense, most of these documents were labeled

“For Official Use Only” and therefore were not accessible for this study. These would have provided a richer description of various communication efforts.

In conclusion, there are many factors that affect implementing effective internal strategic communication. The literature has explained why internal strategic communication efforts in P&R have been floundering. Without trust, transparency, empowerment, and effective use of power, strategic communication suffers. However, it was also observed that many people have the desire to keep trying to improve these efforts. Hopefully with this and future research, those goals will be achieved.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?
2. Please describe a situation where you influenced strategic communication decision making in P&R.
3. Thinking about this same example, why were you successful or unsuccessful? What types of tactics or strategies did you use?
4. Please describe your observations of other internal strategic communication decision making processes within P&R. What strategies worked or did not work?
5. Thinking specifically about strategic communication decisions involving senior leaders, how does their position within P&R influence your or other's abilities to plan and carry out effective internal strategic communication?
6. Describe a time when you had difficulty overcoming disagreements during planning and executing internal communication strategies. How did you overcome these barriers? What did you learn from this experience?
7. How would you describe your feelings towards others involved in successful and unsuccessful internal strategic communication planning and execution? For example, did you experience a greater or reduced willingness to work with them in the future?

### Appendix B

Definition of Power: "Getting things done or getting others to do them." Also, "the ability to influence others."

Definition of strategic communication: conceptualization of how a communication will be shared before it is implemented. Includes designing a strategy to convey goals, values, vision, and intentions of an organization to its audiences (or publics).

### Appendix C

#### Documents used in Triangulation

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