SECRECY IN PRACTICE: HOW MIDDLE MANAGERS PROMOTE

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES BEHIND THE SCENES

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Abstract

In this study, we focus on secrecy within organizations and examine why and how middle managers (MMs) use secrecy to explore and promote strategic initiatives. We conceptualize secrecy as a dynamic social process that unfolds in the political arena and is oriented toward gaining influence and power. It is enacted through a distinct set of practices intentionally designed to conceal and control identities, activities, and information. Drawing on 35 in-depth interviews with executives who recount their experiences as MMs, our findings indicate that MMs tend to use secrecy under unfavorable contextual and personal conditions. Further, we find that MMs use three key practices—*selecting for enrollment, sequencing involvement*, and *controlling information*—to explore and promote strategic initiatives in secrecy. These secrecy practices enable them to influence cognition, emotions, and exchange relations as they compete for attention and support. Finally, our findings suggest that secrecy can lead to two opposite outcomes. Managed carefully, secrecy enhances receptivity to strategic initiatives, but if it is mismanaged, secrecy leads to resistance and distrust.

Keywords: secrecy, middle managers, organizational politics, strategic initiatives

Introduction

Secrecy is a paramount dimension of organizational life, viewed by Max Weber (Gerth & Mills, 1948), Georg Simmel (1906), and Robert Merton (1968) as an inherent characteristic of complex organizations (see Bean, 2017 and Costas & Grey, 2014 for recent overviews). The significance of secrecy is especially evident in the political arena in organizations because members use a variety of secrecy practices such as forming coalitions behind-the-scenes (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988), distorting and restricting information flow (Feldman, 1988), and withholding scarce knowledge (Jackall, 1988) to gain power and influence, as well as to contest institutional power and authority (Morrill, Zald, & Rao, 2003). Indeed, Feldman (1988, p. 87) contends that "Secrecy is a political act *par excellence*; it is a response to power." Further, secrecy is also central to a host of other social processes in organizations, such as gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), trust (Pearce & Klein, 2017), and strategic initiatives (Kreutzer, Walter, & Cardinal, 2015).

Despite its prevalence, however, organizational secrecy is rarely studied in a systematic way (Anand & Rosen, 2008; Jones, 2008; Costas & Grey, 2014). Further, research predominantly adopts an informational perspective, sidestepping the social and processual aspects of secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2014). Consequently, secrecy as a dynamic social process that both is constituted through and shapes social interactions has remained largely undertheorized and unexamined. Moreover, while secrecy

dominates the political arena in organizations, its lived experience and influence are often taken for granted rather than systematically explored.

Our focus is on why and how middle managers (MMs) use secrecy to explore and promote strategic initiatives in organizations. Although promoting strategic issues has a behind-the-scenes side to it (Piderit & Ashford, 2003), as well as a political side involving "political acumen and a willingness to act on it" (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001, pp. 729-30), extant research has rarely examined the more secretive political processes involved in strategic initiatives (Kreutzer et al., 2015; Lechner & Floyd, 2012). Further, research suggests that MMs are likely to engage in "selling" strategic issues and opportunities to top management largely under favorable conditions (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997). Consequently, little is known about how MMs engage in exploring and promoting strategic initiatives under unfavorable conditions, how the secretive political process unfolds, and what kinds of practices they may use to accomplish this process.

In this article, we seek to address these gaps first by conceptualizing secrecy in the political arena as a dynamic social process that is oriented toward gaining influence and power and is enacted through a distinct set of practices intentionally designed to conceal and control identities, activities, and information. Our conceptualization has three complementary aspects. First, in the political arena, secrecy is typically used by actors in order to gain power and influence and promote self-interest (Pettigrew, 1973;

Pfeffer, 1981). Further, secrecy is particularly important for "…. those who don't have the resources or numbers to accomplish their goals through the methods of ordinary politics…" (Streeter, 2008, p. 248; see also Parker, 2016). Second, we identify three distinct practices involved in secrecy. *Selecting for enrollment* reflects purposefully selecting and recruiting actors for participation in the secrecy process. *Sequencing involvement* reflects carefully orchestrating and controlling the timing when recruited actors become involved in the process. *Controlling information* reflects concealing and strategically sharing information as the secrecy process unfolds. These practices typically allow actors to intentionally keep their identities, activities, and interests concealed, invisible, and/or unattributed. Third, we suggest that secrecy unfolds along a multidimensional continuum of knowledge, visibility, and attribution rather than according to a secrecy–transparency dichotomy. Thus, at any given moment, as well as over time, secrecy involves varying degrees of concealment and control.

We then explore the social process of secrecy empirically through interviews with 35 executives about why and how, as MMs, they used secrecy to explore and promote strategic initiatives and what were the outcomes. Since strategic initiatives are inherently political and are often explored covertly, at least initially (Narayanan & Fahey, 1982), they represent an ideal context for studying the social process of secrecy (Lechner & Floyd, 2012). The interview data allow us to develop a process model of secrecy that is enacted in the political arena and unfolds over time (see Figure 1). We

identify key secrecy practices and their consequences and highlight the influence of secrecy on cognition, emotions, and exchange relations. We also explore the effect of secrecy on receptivity and resistance to strategic renewal. Our analysis incorporates conceptual and temporal explanations of secrecy and demonstrates how secrecy evolves and unfolds over time (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013).

Our distinctive contribution is threefold. First, we conceptualize secrecy as a dynamic social process and develop a process model of why and how actors are likely to enact power and influence using secrecy. Further, we explore the interplay between secrecy and transparency, and between controlled and uncontrolled activities, highlighting how secrecy produces ever-shifting patterns of actors, practices, and interests—some invisible and controlled, others visible and uncontrolled. Second, research on the role of MMs in strategic renewal (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008) has largely focused on factors that influence their capacity to wield power and influence (Wooldridge & Floyd, 2017) rather than on *how* power and influence emerge, are enacted, or diminish over time. In contrast, we offer a detailed analysis of how MMs enact power and influence in the context of strategic initiatives and how they employ secrecy to offset a power deficit and overcome unfavorable conditions in pursuit of their goals. Third, secrecy has overwhelmingly been viewed as "bad," objectionable, and problematic—a view that has led to an oversimplified conceptualization of secrecy

(Birchall, 2011a). We offer a more complex, dynamic view of secrecy and demonstrate its transformative power and positive effects on organizational renewal and learning.

In the following section, we discuss the notion of secrecy as a social process and the role of MMs in promoting strategic initiatives. We then present our methodology as well as a detailed analysis of the interview data, which enables us to develop a process model of secrecy that identifies core practices, consequences, and outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical background

Our focus is on secrecy in the political arena in organizations where actors typically mobilize and deploy resources strategically in order to enact power and influence and achieve certain goals (Geppert, Becker-Ritterspach, & Mudambi, 2016). Specifically, we examine why and how MMs explore and promote strategic initiatives in secrecy, using a distinct set of practices designed to conceal and control identities, activities, and information. Strategic initiatives provide a fertile context for studying secrecy because they are inherently political and are often explored and promoted covertly (Lechner & Floyd, 2012). Thus, we examine secrecy as a social process and analyze why and how it emerges, develops, and terminates (Langley et al., 2013) over the course of strategic initiatives in organizations.

Secrecy in the political arena

Organizational secrecy has been defined as "…*the ongoing formal and informal social processes of intentional concealment of information from actors by actors in organizations*" (Costas & Grey, 2014, p. 1423; emphasis in original). Departing from the traditional informational perspective, Costas and Grey (2014) suggest that secrecy is an ongoing social process that requires actors to constantly engage in various practices to ensure concealment and prevent disclosure (see also Bok, 1989). Further, secrecy can fundamentally shape patterns of behavior and interaction in organizations, regulating what is said and not said by whom and to whom (Costas & Grey, 2014).

We focus on informal secrecy as a political strategy involving various forms of concealed activities, such as "behind-the-scenes coalition formation, offline lobbying and cooptation attempts, withholding information, and controlling agendas" (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois,1988, p. 738), "… the creation, distortion, and manipulation of information for the purpose of gaining power" (Feldman, 1988, p. 86), and keeping information secret as a way to "rule the company" (Parker, 2000, p. 137). Central to secret activities is intentionally keeping identities, activities, information, and interests unknown, invisible, and/or unattributed (Morrill et al., 2003). However, since we conceptualize secrecy as a multidimensional continuum of visibility, knowledge, and

attribution rather than as a binary secrecy–transparency dichotomy, there is partial disclosure in some instances.

Research suggests that informal secrecy both breeds organizational politics and is especially prevalent in politicized and conflictual organizations (Feldman, 1988; Grey & Costas, 2016). Further, informal secrecy is associated with a host of damaging effects, including organizational conflicts (Jackall, 1988; Parker, 2000), illegitimate power grabbing (Feldman, 1988), and ineffective decision processes due to lack of transparent information flows (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). Those involved in organizational politics are typically perceived as pursuing self-interest at the expense of organizational interests (Kreutzer, et al., 2015). Consequently, secrecy in organizations is riddled with negative connotations, such as a lack of transparency, impropriety, exclusion, and deception. This negative view, however, obscures the complexity of secrecy as a dynamic social process (Dobusch, Dobusch, & Müller-Seitz, 2019) and overlooks its potentially transformative consequences, thus calling for a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of secrecy (Dufresne & Offstein, 2008; Ringel, 2019).

Promoting strategic initiatives: The role of middle managers

MMs occupy positions between the strategic apex and the operating core of an organization (Mintzberg, 1989). Research taking a "middle management perspective"

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has underscored the role and significance of MMs in various strategy processes, including in promoting strategic initiatives (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; see Wooldridge et al., 2008 for a review). Strategic initiatives, defined as "proactive, temporary undertakings by an individual or a group intended to create economic value for the firm" (Lechner & Floyd, 2012, p. 478; see also Burgelman, 1991; Lechner, Frankenberger, & Floyd, 2010), include a variety of initiatives, such as process improvement projects, new product development, corporate new ventures, acquisition and integration task forces, and other developmental efforts (Kreutzer et al., 2015; Lechner & Floyd, 2012; Ren & Guo, 2011). MMs who pursue strategic initiatives are viewed as constituting the microfoundations of strategic renewal in organizations (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007) because of their capacity to explore initiatives beyond their organizations' current capabilities and to promote them to top management (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Wooldridge et al., 2008; Tarakci, Ates, Floyd, Ahn and Wooldridge, 2018).

The pursuit of strategic initiatives has been characterized as "upward-divergent" strategic behavior that involves searching for new initiatives, selecting certain initiatives, and "selling" them to top management (Burgelman, 1991; Tarakci et al., 2018). However, extant research suggests that MMs are more inclined to engage in selling strategic issues or opportunities to top management when contextual (e.g., perceived organizational support, top management openness) and personal (higher

position in hierarchy, longer tenure) conditions are *favorable* (e.g., Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 1997; Dutton et al., 2001). In the absence of favorable conditions, they are likely to avoid being proactive and may choose to remain silent (Morrison, 2011). Therefore, there is little empirical evidence about how MMs engage in promoting strategic initiatives under unfavorable conditions, how the process might unfold when contextual and/or personal conditions are disadvantageous, and what kinds of practices might be used to accomplish this process.

Further, strategic initiatives create room for political activity due to their inherent novelty and uncertainty (Kreutzer et al., 2015). Indeed, Dutton and her colleagues (2001, p. 729) suggest that the process of issue selling "looks much more political and contextually embedded" than it is typically portrayed. However, with few exceptions (e.g., Kreutzer et al., 2015; Lechner & Floyd, 2012), extant research does not examine the political processes involved in strategic initiatives. Here we suggest that unfavorable conditions may lead MMs to resort to secrecy and bottom-up politicking (Palonen, 2003) in order to gain support and influence resource allocation (e.g., Floyd & Lane, 2000; Kreutzer et al., 2015; Lechner & Floyd, 2012), especially when the initiative is exploratory and diverges from the strategic status quo (Lechner & Floyd, 2012).

Our study is organized around four distinct yet interrelated questions. First, why do MMs engage in secrecy? Here we analyze the conditions and contingencies that

prompt MMs to engage in secrecy when exploring and promoting strategic initiatives. Second, how do MMs engage in secrecy? Here we identify key practices used by MMs to explore and promote strategic initiatives in secrecy. Third, what are the effects of secrecy on all the actors involved? Here we examine the effect of secrecy on cognition, emotions, and exchange relations of participants. Finally, what are the outcomes of secrecy vis-à-vis strategic initiatives? While the literature has mostly focused on the negative consequences of secrecy and politics, we explore the potential influence of secrecy and politics on strategic renewal. For the purposes of this study, "secrecy" refers to the way MMs promote strategic initiatives behind the scenes and discuss them in confidence with others, such that those involved are aware of the secret nature of these interactions.

Methodology

Since secrecy is a sensitive and emotionally charged topic, it presents unique methodological challenges and requires innovative approaches (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). Therefore, this study uses a qualitative method of inquiry (Van Maanen, 1998) to explore and document how secrecy in organizations is initiated, evolves, and morphs into transparent action over time.

Data collection

Data were collected in three rounds of semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth conversational interviews (Goulding, 2002) with 35 executives (24 men, 11 women), 28 of whom had been personally involved in promoting strategic initiatives in secrecy and recounted their experience as MMs in retrospect (see Table 1). The interviews with the seven executives who were not personally involved in secrecy focused on more general observations with regard to how MMs typically go about promoting strategic initiatives. The first round, which involved 10 executives at a large petroleum company, proved to be challenging due to the sensitive nature of the topic, particularly when the interviewees have worked in the same organization. Therefore, in the second round, we interviewed 20 executives from different organizations active in a variety of industries. The third round, which took place two years later, involved inductive interviews with five executives and was informed by our findings from the previous two rounds. The 35 interviews were preceded by a set of preliminary interviews with MBA students at a leading European business school through which key methodological challenges associated with studying secrecy were identified. The primary researcher identified interviewees using a snowball technique and conducted all interviews. Interviews lasted 60 to 120 minutes and were either recorded and transcribed or captured in detailed notes when an interviewee did not wish to be recorded.

The interview protocol was designed to unpack secrecy in organizations and to generate detailed accounts of the process over time. The questions focused on behind-the-scenes actions in the context of proposing an initiative, as the preliminary interviews had indicated that this constituted a particularly meaningful area of informal secrecy. Interviewees were asked to recall recent or distant experiences from their time as MMs in which they had been involved in exploring and promoting a strategic initiative in secrecy. Subsequent questions focused on the secrecy process, including motives for proceeding secretively, the identity of parties with whom ideas were shared in confidence, the manner in which ideas and information were disclosed to those parties, and the timing, method, and challenges associated with sharing those strategic initiatives with broader audiences and gathering wider support for them. We also asked about the consequences of secrecy and explored how MMs understood the process and the emotions they experienced. The interviews thus provided us with rich and evocative material that captured in retrospect the experiences, understandings, and emotions of interviewees as MMs involved in secrecy.

Since the notion of "secrecy" appears to be negatively charged, we often used the terms "confidentiality" and "confidential action" in interviews to induce participants to provide rich and detailed accounts. Thus, we use the term "secrecy" loosely in the sense that "transparency" is its apparent antonym (Birchall, 2011b; see also Ringel, 2019), although the operationalization could have been replaced by a term such as "in confidence." "Secrecy" and "in confidence" both refer to the concealment of activities

and information, and their containment within an exclusive relationship. The complete interview protocol is available from the authors.

Data analysis

In analyzing the interview data, we apply grounded theory as a methodological lens (Goulding, 2002). The data analysis involved systematic, inductive processes in which we identified and categorized motives, actions, and outcomes associated with secrecy in the context of strategic initiatives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding process thus involved the "conceptualization of data by the constant comparison of incident with incident, and incident with concept, in order to develop categories and their properties" (Goulding, 2002, p. 77). Specifically, we used three distinct stages in order to systematically move from raw interview data to theoretical categories and then into more abstract theoretical dimensions and insights (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Figure 2 provides an overview of the data structure.

The first stage involved open line-by-line coding (using NVivo software), examining each line of data, and then defining the action or events within it. Line-by-line coding helped to establish action codes, which provided insight into what people were doing and various events in the focal setting (Charmaz, 2000). In the second stage, different accounts involving secrecy situations were grouped together and second-order constructs were surfaced. In the third stage, we identified underlying core categories that could suggest an emergent theory, following Corely and Gioia (2004) and Van

Maanen (1998). Here, we established that there were conditions, actions, immediate effects, and primary outcomes of secrecy. Similarly to Corely and Gioia (2004), the surfacing of second-order constructs and aggregate dimensions was not linear, but iterative in nature. To further ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, a second person independently coded a random sample of transcripts or interview notes for 15 interviewees. There was substantial agreement between the first and second coder. Disagreements were resolved through discussions, and in the few cases where disagreement persisted, the coding of the principal researcher took precedence.

Secrecy as a social process in the political arena of organizations

As Figure 1 illustrates, there are four main dimensions to the process model of secrecy that emerged from the experiences of the MMs interviewed in this study: (1) key conditions that prompt MMs to engage in secrecy, (2) key secrecy practices used by MMs, (3) the effects of secrecy on cognition, emotions, and exchange relations, and (4) the outcomes of secrecy vis-à-vis strategic initiatives. Our analysis thus focuses empirically on secrecy as an evolving phenomenon and incorporates conceptual and temporal explanations of practices and their associated activities and effects (Langley et al., 2013).

Why do middle managers engage in secrecy?

Three key conditions, (1) power concentration, (2) low-power actor, and (3) proposal characteristics—operating at the contextual, individual, and proposal level, respectively—prompted 28 MMs to intentionally use secrecy in order to explore and promote strategic initiatives and influence management favorably.

Power concentration. Secrecy and behind-the-scenes activities were more pronounced when power and decision making were concentrated at the top (Greve & Mitsuhashi, 2007) and the organizational climate was perceived as unsupportive. In such a context, MMs were typically excluded from the strategy process and had fewer opportunities to speak up and therefore often pursued strategic initiatives in secrecy:

> Management was not particularly interested in what people
>
> thought at N-1, N-2, and so on. They saw the situation like this: we
>
> were the mules that carried the load, they were the ones leading us
>
> by the rein. And it was hard to imagine that management would
>
> accept a mule's opinion about where they should lead us…. It's
>
> not even that we were afraid. It was just how it was …. So most
>
> mules had lost all interest in thinking whether they were being led
>
> to a desert or an oasis. They just didn't even bother. And the few
>
> who cared knew that sharing ideas on direction, and especially

suggesting a new direction—just like this—to everyone… this

wouldn't go down well with management…. So, I had to pull

people aside and be like 007.

Thus, it appears that MMs are likely to resort to secrecy when the top

management team (TMT) does not allow middle management to participate (Raes,

Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011) and is generally inaccessible—restrictions that result in

narrow opportunities for upward influence (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). In such a context,

transparently proposing strategic initiatives created "the impression of providing

unsolicited input." In addition, the busy schedules of TMT members made them rather

impatient. Respondents reported resorting to secrecy in order to avoid sanctions and

protect the initiatives from possible early penalties: "I work in an environment where

[management] is not interested in [our] ideas. There are penalties—mainly social

ones—for wasting [management's] time. This really took the wind out of my sails. It

discouraged me from bringing up my idea publicly." Thus, secrecy shielded MMs from

penalties and premature exposure to an audience perceived as non-supportive: "I could

not simply blurt out my idea to everyone … I had to confidentially reach out to some

key players first and gather blessings in advance." One interviewee compared the logic

of secrecy with his experience in a previous workplace: "The fact that I could

informally chat with my CEO and top management team made me more open every

time I wanted to propose a large-scale change."

Low-power actor. The notion of low-power actor reflects the relatively low position of an individual actor in the social hierarchy of the organization that typically prevents him or her from operating effectively (Levy & Reiche, 2018). MMs with short organizational tenure can be viewed as low-power actors because they lack the social and cultural capital, critical resources, and legitimacy required to influence the strategic process (Barsoux & Bouquet, 2013; Levy et al., 2015). MMs with longer tenure often have access to resources embedded in organizational social networks and accumulate social capital (Greve & Mitsuhashi, 2007). Furthermore, longer tenure is associated with the accumulation of firm-specific cultural capital—proficiency in the tacit normative and cognitive "rules of the game" (Levy & Reiche, 2018) and knowledge about "how the system works" (Dutton et al., 2001). Both social and cultural capital yield greater informal power and influence (Levy & Reiche, 2018).

Our findings indicate that MMs who had been with the company for less than two years were more likely to engage in secrecy to promote their proposals. As

newcomers, they were often perceived as outgroup members who lacked the track record and legitimacy required to initiate change: "I was the new kid on the block, and I could not openly tell people that they were inefficient and that restructuring was necessary. I would have faced too much resistance." The effect of short tenure of MMs was particularly pronounced in organizations with long-tenured TMTs:

> [Some members of management] have worked here for 15 to 20
>
> years. There is a long institutional memory and our management is
>
> conservative… They implement new products, but they do not
>
> look for new ways to do things. They look at what to do, rather
>
> than how to do it. As I was so new, I doubted that I would get the
>
> support I needed, so I started out under the radar.

Proposal characteristics. Two characteristics of the proposal itself—the extent to which it was (1) well developed and (2) explorative, i.e., exploring new capabilities as opposed to exploiting existing capabilities (Lechner & Floyd, 2012)—were important considerations in whether to promote it secretly or openly. When proposals were underdeveloped and explorative, MMs felt insecure, which led them to initially keep their proposals under wraps. Unease about sharing a proposal was widespread when the proposal lacked a clear roadmap and trajectory:

[Introducing major change to the core product] would be a journey

from point A to B. I didn't have the map in advance—where were

the bridges, the shortcuts, etc. At this early stage, how could I

share it with someone when they would have dismissed the idea,

or worse yet—killed it? No one wants to hear their worst fears—

that the execution is bound to fail. So I could only tell it in

confidence to two people, discuss it with them… Until at least I

figured out an approximate trajectory for getting from A to B.

These MMs used sequenced involvement to protect their proposals and foster input under safe conditions: "I may have had a good idea, but the hard part was developing it into something viable. Unless you develop the idea incrementally by involving people step by step, then it may very well be killed." One interviewee referred to "snowballing" when describing how secrecy enabled an incremental approach to involvement: "I made people part of the snowball. I started out with one [peer] and asked him not to tell anyone for a while. It was the two of us ... I then involved the top senior person…. That is how change can be made successfully."

Relatively explorative initiatives also prompted MMs to more actively recruit actors and build a network of supporters, which is consistent with Lechner and Floyd's (2012) findings on the importance of coalition building in the case of explorative

initiatives that deviate from the strategic status quo. Revealing the idea in secrecy to a select few provided a way to further develop an "embryonic idea" and, consequently, gain confidence and support by working with others in a protected environment. Some respondents explained their choice of secrecy as a desire to "only involve certain people in order to nurture the idea and build a strong case for it."

How do middle managers engage in secrecy?

Three key practices relating to the process of instigating and promoting strategic initiatives in secrecy emerged from our informants' experiences: (1) selecting for enrollment, (2) sequencing involvement, and (3) controlling information. These three practices ensured that the process remained secretive: The first two helped conceal the identities and activities of those involved, while the third focused on controlling and strategically sharing information.

Selecting for enrollment. The first practice involved selective recruitment of actors for the purpose of engagement with the strategic initiative. This practice was key for ensuring that activities remained "under the radar" and for safeguarding against leaks. Not surprisingly, trustworthiness was paramount: "I wanted to share it with someone I trusted, someone who would keep the secret and keep their promise." Recruitment skills are particularly critical for MMs who lack a track record in the organization and need to

garner support (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016; Wooldridge et al., 2008). Our analysis indicates that MMs hand-picked (Hope, 2010) both top managers (vertically) and peers (laterally) based on their potential contributions, relational qualities, and personal characteristics.

MMs hand-picked top managers typically based on their potential contribution of hierarchical legitimization—"in his ExCo role, his support was critical," substantive input into the proposal—"she had vast experience and I knew she could help me turn [the idea] into something presentable," and promotion of the initiative within the organization—"I just needed him [CFO] as a champion, people always listened to him." MMs usually recruited peers with whom they could freely discuss and further develop the proposal. Peers were also involved for their knowledge and political support: "[My peer] is a good expert, respected… folks were more likely to support me if he was in." In the few instances that subordinates were enrolled, it was to gain access to clerical support and first-hand knowledge of the political processes within the organization, as they "had previously observed the processes … [and] therefore had very detailed knowledge that I could use."

MMs also recruited participants for their perceived personal qualities, but denied that friendship influenced their decisions, suggesting that "it is not important that this person is my friend. Business is business." Nevertheless, personal qualities mattered. Interviewees usually looked for "someone with a can-do attitude." Any major strategic

initiative is difficult to execute, and agents feared sharing ideas with actors who might react in a defeatist manner: "I knew that, unlike other people, she would believe my reform was doable. She likes a challenge." Interviewees also pointed out that emotional stability was an important personal quality because the actors involved needed to remain calm "under cover": "I needed someone reasonable. A lot of people get emotional when you tell them something. By emotional, I mean either too worried or too excited—I wanted to avoid both." Most importantly, when sharing proposals in confidence, agents looked for capabilities: "I had to go to someone who was very intelligent, so that I could crystallize my idea. I knew I would have to defend my position." Finally, some actors were selected because they had been "helpful in the past."

Sequencing involvement. Interviewees described having a sense of when it was appropriate and effective to bring on board different parties. They mentioned that top managers and peers were brought into the process at different times because they could help advance the strategic initiative in different ways. Thus, sequencing involvement was critical for the optimal utilization of vertical and lateral resources.

The involvement process typically followed a temporal sequence. First, the MM carefully selected peer(s) with whom to share the idea or proposal in private, in the hope of "improving the idea to the point where I was confident enough to include senior

people." Discussions with peers allowed for the exchange of ideas, input, advice, and information that further developed the proposal. They were also able to discuss the context and political maneuvering required to push the proposal forward and upward. Next, the MM and peers shared the proposal with a specific member of the TMT, whom they deemed likely to be supportive. That TMT member was asked to keep the proposal confidential. Finally, after involving the TMT member, the MM publicly advanced the proposal to the entire TMT. Thus, the development of the proposal with peers gave MMs the courage to take it to actors with legitimate power and managerial discretion who could promote it to their peers on the TMT and to the CEO. However, they approached the TMT member with a different agenda—asking for "advice on presenting the idea to the TMT." Thus, although the proposal's development continued through private interactions with a specific TMT member, the conversation here also revolved around presenting and packaging the initiative.

The timing of recruitment varied from "within days of coming up with the idea" to "never" depending on the level of confidence of the MM. The need to respond to objections and to explain the initiative provided reassurance: "There is an old joke that you are an expert at something when you can explain it to your grandmother. When you can eloquently explain it to her, then you are confident in your idea." For most interviewees, the timing of recruiting a TMT member was determined by their ability to handle objections to their proposed initiative: "When I felt ready to respond to possible

objections, I knew I could take it to the next level. Prior to that, if the CEO had come to me and asked me about it, I would have lied to him, saying this was the first I had heard of it." It worth noting that although the typical secrecy process of our interviewees involved deliberately recruiting and sequencing the involvement of peers and top managers, there were exceptions where a small number of MMs involved either peers or a top manager. At times, the process was aborted altogether as a result of unfavorable feedback.

Controlling information. Safeguarding information and strategically disclosing it are at the heart of secrecy. Our analysis revealed that MMs engaged in seven key informational activities: keeping, sharing, preserving, passing on, disclosing, broadcasting, and leaking. Rather than being dichotomous (i.e., secrecy versus transparency), these seven activities unfolded along a continuum with varying degrees of secrecy and transparency. In the most secretive of activities, information was held only by the MM (solitary), while the most transparent activity entailed the sharing of information with all organizational employees. Between these two poles, secrecy evolved to become more open through the gradual involvement of other actors, which resulted in the MM's progressively losing control over the information.

Keeping information was the solitary act of intentionally withholding an idea or knowledge from all others: "I kept [the idea] to myself for a while… I would not have

admitted to it even if my boss had explicitly asked me..." Thus, keeping information was defined by the MM's intention to avoid sharing the idea. *Sharing* information involved selecting the first actor(s) with whom to share the information and explicitly framing the information as exclusive and "for your eyes only." This could be a one-on-one interaction or could involve two or three people who were told by the MM at the same time: "Sharing a secret with someone means putting them in the know… but it has to be clear that the information is not to be repeated to others. I always say this plainly, even when it is implied or should be understood given the sensitive nature of the topic." Furthermore, the interviews indicated that *preserving* information entailed this second party guarding it from third parties. Preserving occurred only after the information was shared with others: "It is one thing to walk around the company with an idea in my head and not share it. It is a whole different thing to share it and to know that it is being contained by two people."

When it came to sharing the information with third parties, interviewees distinguished between *passing on* confidential information ("My colleague asked if she could share the idea with [third colleague's name] and I said 'yes' because I thought we could trust him and I believed his input might help us move forward") and *leaking* it. *Leaking* involved revealing confidential information to a third party without the consent of the MM: "He never asked if he could talk about it with others… I am sure he knew I would have objected, but he did it anyway." Finally, interviewees distinguished

between disclosing and broadcasting. *Disclosing* implied that the MM or other actors revealed the content of the strategic initiative to the TMT but did not share it broadly with other employees. Some interviewees said that they had disclosed an initiative themselves after being "invited by [the top manager they consulted] to present it to the rest of the TMT," while others delegated disclosure to the top manager who "was the champion from then on, always giving me the credit I deserved..." *Broadcasting* (some called it "publicly announcing") information involved sharing the proposal with all interested actors in the organization. This usually occurred after the TMT decided to develop and implement the strategic initiative: "Obviously, [broadcasting] the idea to all company employees could only occur after senior management had approved it."

What are the effects of secrecy?

The key secrecy practices noted above resulted in three distinct effects. First, they led to *structuring cognition* as secrecy operated as a mechanism for MMs to capture the attention of participants. Once the participants were paying attention, secrecy contributed to *managing emotions* by enhancing the sense of psychological safety. Finally, secrecy contributed to *managing exchange relations* by triggering a sense of reciprocity in participants, who often felt compelled to help the initiative.

Structuring cognition: Capturing attention. Secrecy and controlling "what information is given, how and to whom it is presented" (Hope, 2010, p. 198) are crucial in capturing attention (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), especially in a hectic fast-paced organization where competition for attention is fierce and "… meetings [have] to be scheduled weeks, if not months, in advance." In such a context, MMs used secrecy to grab the attention of top managers and peers who were "generally busy with all kinds of things—projects and deadlines. It is more difficult for them to devote their time to your initiative." In particular, they used secrecy to pique the curiosity of top managers, emphasizing that the information must remain "confidential":

> This was a guy who was super busy, and didn't have any time for chit-chat. He also didn't give a damn about involving us or encouraging us. No… I knew that if he heard my idea at an official meeting with other TMT members and middle managers, he would be the first to dismiss it… So one morning, I ran into him in the elevator and told him I had an idea that was still in the works... but for his ears only. He told me to come see him in an hour.

Once attention had been captured, MMs could present their ideas: "I put forward my ideas, taking my time… If I was normally rushed with [top manager], this time I felt calmer and could set the scene for my idea in the right way." Further, this also enabled MMs to provide more context and shape the meaning and framing in the appropriate

way: "[By] speaking just the two of us, I was able to give more details and guide them through my logic more effectively." Thus, our analysis indicates that secrecy was used to circumvent the inherent attention capacity constraint of senior managers, thereby shaping actors' awareness and understanding (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010). It appears to be a particularly potent practice in companies operating in a "super fast industry where no one has a minute to stop"—high-velocity environments that require rapid decision making.

Managing emotions: Creating psychological safety. Once attention was captured, MMs were able to bring participants into a safe space protected by secrecy. More specifically, secrecy helped interviewees avoid, process, and contain negative feelings by creating a safe "microclimate" in which to explore and rework proposals. When addressing the need to share her idea, one interviewee emphasized that hand-picking actors and framing the conversation as a secret one allowed her to test her idea safely and avoid negative emotions, such as embarrassment: "I would have made a fool of myself by proposing an untested idea to the top people." It therefore seems that secrecy practices, especially selective recruitment and sequenced involvement, enabled effective information seeking and created a safe environment in which to prepare and package proposals, especially when the initiatives were in the early stages of development.

In further examples, interviewees discussed how the "safety" of secretive interactions allowed those involved to process negative emotions: "It felt safe to vent to each other, which helped reduce our sense of frustration with the company's inertia. Moreover, talking to each other was like a security blanket … and it prevented us from blowing off steam in the wrong place." Moreover, when speaking to more senior leaders, this enhanced safety further resulted in courage to share ideas in a bolder way: "I was less shy than when I normally bring ideas forward in the open, proposing some ideas that were a bit more out there." Accordingly, secrecy appears instrumental for those MMs engaged in strategic renewal—a process that often triggers negative emotions, including anxiety, embarrassment, and frustration, as a result of inherent uncertainty (Huy, 1999). These emotions are magnified if the organizational climate is perceived as lacking "psychological safety," defined as allowing employees to "show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 708; Edmondson, 1999). Therefore, our analysis suggests that MMs utilized secrecy as a mechanism to create a protected space and ensure psychological safety, thereby minimizing the negative emotions often associated with strategic renewal.

Managing exchange relations: Eliciting reciprocity. Our analysis suggests that secrecy practices, especially selective enrollment and controlled information, elicited a sense of obligation to reciprocate the vote of confidence. This finding supports the idea

that secrecy and entrusting others with information can evoke a strong affective commitment (Dufresne & Offstein, 2008) and influence identity (Costas & Grey, 2014), resulting in their feeling that "they now belonged to an exclusive club where information was being shared only with a few individuals." Such feeling, coupled with the promise to keep that information confidential, increased the recruited actors' self-worth and encouraged them to reciprocate (Rodriguez & Ryave, 1992).

The desire to reciprocate had different roots. Most MMs stated that enrolling a top manager created a bond that increased his or her willingness to help. Others reported that their peers "felt special because they were entrusted with confidential information," which prompted them to provide input. One respondent reported that he "could tell that my colleague was flattered that I had singled him out and trusted him with this idea… I am sure this made him more willing to help me," supporting the idea that secrecy carries a symbolic value (Costas & Grey, 2014). One interviewee added a more practical view that emphasized the instrumental nature of secrecy: "Information is like currency—I sold it. It was really about benefiting from disclosing an idea earlier than it was supposed to be released. It is a common practice." This notion of exchange was also reflected in respondents' reports that the top manager "wanted to score brownie points [with the TMT]. I do not think he wanted to claim the idea as his own, but he certainly thought that being its backer during management meetings could reflect positively on him." Thus, secrecy appears to have elicited reciprocity among top

managers by creating a bond, making them feel flattered, or highlighting the potential for future benefits. Top managers returned a favor either by improving the quality of the strategic initiative (i.e. proposal characteristics) or by providing coalition support during or after the presentation of the proposal at the TMT level.

What are the outcomes of secrecy?

We focus on two primary and contrasting outcomes of the secrecy process: Receptivity and resistance to strategic initiatives.

Receptivity to strategic initiatives. When MMs carefully managed the secrecy process by hand-picking actors, sequencing their involvement, and ensuring the optimal timing of information sharing, secrecy increased the likelihood that TMT members would respond positively to the strategic initiative. First, receptivity was aided through the improved quality of the strategic initiative—by sharing the MM was able to generate "challenging, opposing arguments" or come up with "new, interesting, and exciting propositions":

> Discussing things secretly with him [peer] made for a great bonding experience that was a two-way street. I shared my ideas and he played the devil's advocate, coming up with arguments for why and where I could get stuck. As the process

went on, he thereby helped me finetune the idea. Eventually, I realized the idea had become great. So I assembled courage to take it to the top guys.

Second, secrecy enhanced receptivity to strategic initiatives through the building of a supportive coalition (Lechner & Floyd, 2012). More specifically, for interviewees who followed the peer–top manager sequence of involvement, secrecy helped secure the commitment of a top manager who, in addition to providing input on the content and packaging of the initiative, typically promoted the initiative among other TMT members:

> The [top manager] I shared this with was not someone I knew well. My instinct told me that he could contribute... He thanked me for consulting him, and he said I could count on him to back me up in meetings with management. He had my back. I guess our long discussions made him feel special in a way. It was unexpected.

Such endorsement was crucial: "He was encouraging and supportive during the meeting [with the other top managers]. I think his approval was key… Everything went smoothly and the response was positive. Those guys are like a club—if one of them gives a nod, then the rest are less hostile." Other respondents expressed sentiments similar to the following: "if I had not kept things private throughout the process, I would not have been able to manage the process as well… I certainly would not have

gotten the favorable reaction that I got from management." Some top managers became active champions of the initiative and were the ones to propose it to the TMT: "We had gone back and forth and I had a sense she would support such a move [geographic expansion]. Then she proposed that she bring it up to the rest of management… I did not mind—she was a key player, so I thought this would mean greater support at the top." No less important was support in the form of inaction:

> I shared it with [the CFO], expecting him to like it and possibly support it. Then he said that he understood it but he was not sure about it. Still, he told me to go to the top management team and that he would not sabotage me. That was good enough for me.

Thus, secrecy enabled MMs to prepare the ground—a necessary step in mobilizing action—(Huy, 1999) by following a controlled and incremental approach to upward influence (Dutton et al., 2001), which resulted in enhanced receptivity to their proposals.

Resistance to strategic initiatives. Resistance to strategic initiatives was often the result of leaks. When secrecy was prematurely exposed, TMT members became suspicious about the lack of transparency and responded by resisting the initiative. The unplanned revelation of information along with the perceived intensity of "private" consultations had strong negative effects. Not surprisingly, in these situations, MMs

understated the frequency, duration, and importance of prior secretive interactions, labeling them as "advice," "consultation," and "brainstorming":

> "We [the middle manager and the top manager] never said we had been talking several times a week over a period of six months… I made it sound much more casual than it was, saying I had mentioned it to [name of top manager] and that he had reacted positively."

Another MM reported that revealing secretive interactions "created a sense of mistrust that destroyed the chance for a positive attitude toward decentralizing, regardless of its potential benefits." Three MMs who experienced a similar scenario explained that the unexpected leak "turned everything sour" and "branded me as a 'plotter' slash 'conspirator'." In one case, the top manager inadvertently revealed information about ongoing discussions with two MMs:

> "I would definitely label this a leak because he revealed information at the wrong time and in the wrong way without asking or warning me. He also told [his peers] how often we had been meeting. Everyone became very suspicious and asked: 'Why the secrecy?'"

Thus, the leak revealed the extent of prior secretive interactions and resulted in other top managers feeling excluded: "They accused me of not being open." Most importantly,

leaks were described as having more long-lasting consequences: "From then on, there was general suspicion about where ideas were coming from. Some members of senior management were skeptical to begin with, not just toward me but also toward change in general." Thus, leaks increased organizational inertia by undermining the credibility of actors, impeding collaborative behavior, and causing TMT fragmentation (Hambrick, 1995), thereby jeopardizing the efficacy of future decision making.

Discussion

In this study, we develop a process model of secrecy and explore how MMs enact power and influence through practices designed to conceal and control the process. Specifically, we analyze how MMs use three key practices—selecting for enrollment, sequencing involvement, and controlling information—to promote strategic initiatives in secrecy. We find that secrecy enables MMs to shape cognition, emotions, and exchange relations as they compete for scarce resources, such as attention and support. We also find that secrecy can lead to two opposite outcomes. A carefully managed secrecy process enhances receptivity to strategic renewal, whereas mismanaged secrecy leads to resistance and suspicion. Our analysis thus documents how secrecy evolves over time and how it can deliberately or abruptly come to an end. Our approach has major implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical implications

First, we advance the literature by developing a process model of "upward-divergent" influence in secrecy that draws attention to two particular processual elements of organizational "politics as activity": Politicking and politicization (Palonen, 2003), highlighting the interplay between them. "Politicking" refers to struggles over the redistribution of existing resources (Palonen, 2003), whereas "politicization" refers to challenges to the established power structures (Palonen, 2003). We suggest, however, that secrecy simultaneously reaffirms and challenges the established power relations, thus destabilizing the distinction between politicking and politicization in organizations. Specifically, our analysis indicates that MMs use secrecy as politicking in an attempt to influence the distribution of resources while showing deference to the established power structures and communication channels. At the same time, the use of secrecy circumvents the chain of command and may subvert established power relations, thereby operating as politicization. Thus, our analysis highlights the duality of secrecy processes that concomitantly reproduce and undermine the established rules of the game and patterns of domination.

Second, extant research has typically emphasized that risk aversion and self-protection play a crucial role in the decision on whether or not to engage in agentic activities such as issue selling (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998), suggesting

that MMs are less likely to raise a strategic issue if they believe that it carries personal risk. In contrast, we show that MMs find ways to act even when their personal contextual circumstances are unfavorable. Thus, although secrecy and politics are often viewed as detrimental to the organization (Hebb, 2006; Prat, 2005), we find that for MMs, secrecy and politics may mitigate personal and organizational disadvantages, thereby offering an avenue for agency and creativity. By enhancing a sense of autonomy and control and by creating a safe space for experimentation, secrecy can facilitate organizational renewal. Our findings thus support recent contributions demonstrating that secrecy can help rather than hinder creative work (Courpasson & Younes, 2018) and can facilitate the ethical transformation of power relationships (Younes, Courpasson, & Jacob, 2018).

Third, we suggest that although transparency has become a political and cultural ideal (Birchall, 2011b), secrecy has remained pervasive in organizations. Thus, we draw attention to a host of microprocesses in organizations that are characterized by varying degrees of secrecy, such as conflict and resistance (Ybema & Horvers, 2017), organizational silence (Morrison, 2011), whistleblowing (Park & Keil, 2009), and gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). We suggest that these processes should be analyzed in terms of the interplay between visibility and invisibility, and known and unknown, rather than as a binary opposition between secrecy and transparency. In this respect,

Birchall (2011b, p. 7) points out that the moral discourse condemning secrecy and rewarding transparency may lead to a misreading of the symbiotic relationship between secrecy and transparency, and that we therefore "need to find different ways of staying with the aporia of transparency-as-secrecy and secrecy-as-transparency."

Practical implications

Our work also has implications for management practice. In particular, our framework provides guidance for MMs navigating their organizational life and for organizations wishing to facilitate strategic renewal. First, since MMs are increasingly playing central and proactive roles in strategic renewal (Wooldridge et al., 2008), they need skills and resources in order to gain support and traction. More specifically, our research points to the predicament of low-power actors who lack legitimacy, critical resources, network ties (Barsoux & Bouquet, 2013), and cultural capital (Levy & Reiche, 2018)—all of which are necessary to operate effectively within the organization. Secrecy thus emerges as an important tool that can mitigate the disadvantages of a low-power position by allowing MMs to discreetly gauge the organizational context and political landscape, develop social ties with like-minded allies, and slowly acquire the resources required to effectively operate as a strategic renewal agent. Secrecy has also emerged as an important part of MMs' discursive abilities, which are essential for influencing others (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Second, we find that by ensuring psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), secrecy can contribute to idea fruition (Griffiths-Hemans & Grover, 2006). It affords MMs a greater degree of freedom to pursue risky strategies that might otherwise be met with criticism, ridicule, or resistance. Since underdeveloped ideas are often vulnerable to attack, MMs can use secrecy to create a safe space in which they control enrollment and have the freedom to experiment.

Third, with the rise of transparency as a moral and operating principle (Birchall, 2011b), organizations may have swung too far in the direction of complete and total transparency, thereby jeopardizing their long-term competitiveness and, ultimately, their survival (Dufresne & Offstein, 2008). Organizations that seek to encourage creativity and renewal are well advised to carve out spaces and forums in which employees can safely engage in exploration and experimentation (Edmondson, 1999).

Limitations

This study has several limitations that point to directions for future research. First, the study mostly relies on self-reports of executives who recounted their experience as MMs. These agent-centric accounts may have understated the complexity and multiplicity of secrecy processes that, although painstakingly controlled, might still involve less than carefully choreographed actors and elements. Future research could explore this phenomenon using ethnographic or case study methods that could capture

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the complexity of the process and the exchange relations among actors, as well as including contemporaneous multi-actor accounts. Second, the majority of secrecy processes described by participants took place in low power distance countries, where power and influence are supposedly distributed more equally (Hofstede, 2001). Low power distance settings should presumably have enabled MMs to interact more comfortably across hierarchical levels. Nevertheless, many MMs reported that power was concentrated at the top and that this structural characteristic of the organization shaped their actions. Although the relative homogeneity of the cultural settings limits the generalizability of our study, it also highlights that while organizations are imbued with macro-level cultural characteristics, their power structures are semi-autonomous rather than a mere reflection of broad cultural dimensions. Third, the study of secrecy presents significant methodological challenges. For instance, this study used conceptually related terms, such as "in confidence," "confidentiality," and "confidential" during interviews. This operationalization is not without drawbacks, but it proved useful in eliciting rich descriptions of secrecy.

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Table 1: Interview Participants[1]

		Respondent	Organization	Gender	Age
1st round	1	Head of Business Development	Petroleum company	M	48
	2	Vice President Strategy	Petroleum company	M	58
	3	Director, Business Control	Petroleum company	M	55
	4	Senior Vice President Production & Logistics	Petroleum company	M	52
	5	Director M&A	Petroleum company	M	54
	6	Senior Manager, Product Sector	Petroleum company	M	49
	7	Senior Vice President Oil Retail	Petroleum company	M	53
	8	Senior Vice President Oil Products	Petroleum company	M	56
	9	Head of Technology Office	Petroleum company	M	45
	10	Vice President Base Oils	Petroleum company	M	57
2nd round	11	Chief of Strategy	International finance institution	M	55
	12	Regional Director	International finance institution	M	53
	13	Principal	International Finance Institution	F	53
	14	Chief Technologist	Aerospace company	M	54
	15	Head of Group Strategy and Planning	Food company	M	44
	16	Vice President Human Resources	Machine manufacturer	M	55
	17	Vice President Strategy	Machine manufacturer	M	51
	18	Vice President Production & Logistics	Machine manufacturer	M	49
	19	Manager, Business Development	Automobile manufacturer	M	45
	20	Vice President, Human Resources	Automobile manufacturer	F	46
	21	Vice President Operations	Retail trade company	M	48
	22	Vice President Finance	Retail trade company	M	50
	23	Vice President Marketing	Retail trade company	M	51
	24	Vice President, Human Resources	Healthcare operator	F	44
	25	Partner	Law firm	F	50
	26	Vice President Technology	Information technology company	F	38
	27	Director, Client Relations	Bank	F	41
	28	Director, M&A	Financial services company	M	57
	29	Partner	Consulting company	M	58
	30	Vice President Marketing	Advertising agency	M	49
3rd round	31	Marketing Manager	Business school	F	32
	32	Supply Chain Manager	Pharmaceutical company	F	43
	33	Head of Training & Development	Pharmaceutical company	F	40
	34	Director Business Development	Pharmaceutical company	F	40
	35	Training Manager	Bank	F	44

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[1] All participants were employed by organizations with at least 100 employees.

Figure 1: Process Model of Secrecy in the Political Arena in Organizations

CONDITIONS

SECRECY PRACTICES

EFFECTS

OUTCOMES

Power concentration

Low-power actors

Proposal characteristics

Selecting for enrollment

Controlling information

Sequencing involvement

Structuring cognitions

Managing emotions

Managing exchange relations

Receptivity to initiative

Leak

Resistance to initiative

Figure 2: Data Structure

1st Order Concepts

- Agents assessing criteria for enrolling peers (laterally) and top managers (vertically) into the secret process
- Common selection criteria for vertical and lateral enrollment: relational, and personal characteristics
- Different criteria: Lateral was based on peers' potential for input to the proposal; vertical on potential to legitimize the initiative

- Orchestrating lateral involvement (to further development of the proposal and doing one's "homework")
- Orchestrating vertical involvement (to discuss how to "package" or "sell" the proposal)
- Recognizing windows of opportunity to involve others into the secret process

- Controlling information through 7 practices: Keeping, sharing, preserving, passing on, disclosing, broadcasting, and leaking
- Moving from secret to overt practices implied a loss of control over the information
- Leaks caused the ultimate loss of control and had decidedly negative effects

- Referring to the change proposal as "confidential" aroused curiosity and ensured TM's undivided attention
- Secret actions enabled MMs to set the scene for conversations with TMs
- Secret actions enabled MMs to shape the construction of meaning

- Through the secret interactions, agents and recipients could avoid, process, and contain negative emotions
- Secret actions allowed agents to create an environment of psychological safety
- The security provided through the secret interactions enabled risk-taking and learning

- Sharing an idea confidentially created a bond and elicited recipients' desire to help
- Peers reciprocated with information or advice on improving the initiative
- TMs reciprocated with a commitment to support the initiative

- TMs supported the change initiative during TMT meetings
- TMT members were receptive when the initiative had a TMT advocate
- Understating the intensity of secrecy was crucial for TMT support

- When leaked, secret actions resulted in TMT mistrust
- Long-term negative implications for TMT decision-making
- TMT skepticism toward change

- Lack of supportive climate
- MMs excluded from the process of strategy formulation
- Infrequent and short opportunities for contact between MMs and TMT

- Lack of a precise plan for implementing the change initiative
- Fear that the change proposal will be rejected
- Need to work with others in order to "nurture" the proposal

- MMs with short tenure perceived they lacked legitimacy as newcomers
- As newcomers with under 2 years of tenure, MMs lacked confidence
- MMs felt the need to "test the ground" as they were unfamiliar with the social networks and resources

2nd Order Themes

- Selecting for enrollment
- Sequencing involvement
- Controlling information
- Structuring cognition
- Managing emotions
- Managing exchange relations
- Receptivity to strategic initiative
- Resistance to strategic initiative
- Power concentration
- Proposal characteristics
- Low-power actors

Aggregate Dimensions
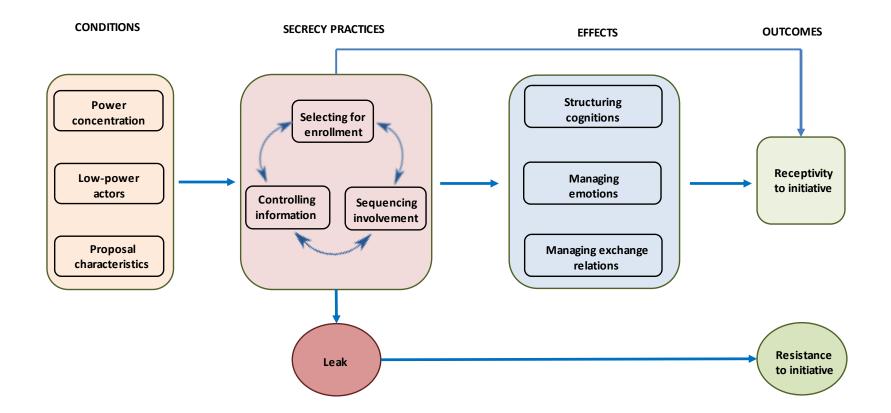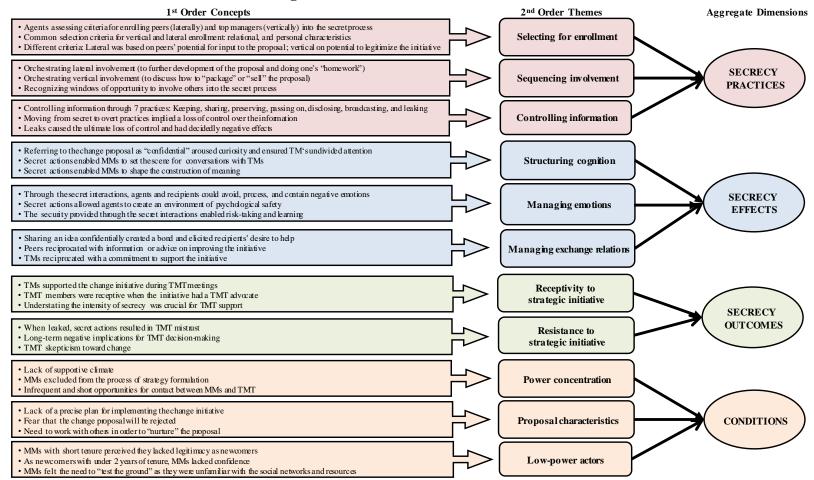
- SECRECY PRACTICES
- SECRECY EFFECTS
- SECRECY OUTCOMES
- CONDITIONS

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