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When Organizational Change Results in Symbolic Convergence:

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When Organizational Change Results in Symbolic Convergence:

A Postmortem Case Study

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[Signature]

Johanna Palmer
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Introduction
The circumstances surrounding this case study took place while the researcher was a product development department staff member with a large, midwestern, window and door manufacturer. For purposes of anonymity and privacy, all names are fictitious throughout the work.

The purpose of this thesis is to help gain a better understanding of organizational change during times of new technology implementation. It is intended to shed light on what things are helpful and what things are not, during times of major organizational change, through advancing the utility of Symbolic convergence theory.

Today, changes in technology are occurring all around us, at an ever-increasing rate. If organizations intend to remain viable and effectively compete in a global market place they will need to better understand how the implementation of new technical advancements can effect the organization at large. This research is intended to help gain a better understanding of how an organization might better adapt when new technologies need to be introduced. It analyzes how and why a symbolic convergence evolved during the implementation of a new business computer system, and what positive and negative effect attempts to control the situation may have had on the host organization.

This work is based on events that occurred in a manufacturing business environment, in an organization that employed over one thousand people, which had branch facilities in the eastern, southern and north-central regions of the United States. The XYZ Corporation was growing rapidly and experiencing ownership and management changes on a three to four year basis. As the end of the 1990s approached, top managers needed to prepare the organization for continued expansion and growth in the new
millennium. Publicly traded, east coast based ownership was striving to align different
divisions and sister companies to maximize efficiency and profitability. A task of this
magnitude would increase the importance of a strong and well-understood vision for the
future. It would be important for a sense of unity to be in place that organization
members could understand and follow. Instead of a strong rhetorical vision for the future
taking hold and becoming a focus for support, unforeseen circumstances led to the
evolution of a symbolic convergence.

This resulted in a new business computer system being assigned a persona that no
one anticipated or could control. The persona that emerged could be identified through
the utterance of one word, and that word was Bubba. Initially a name used in playful jest,
it became a focus for unexpected shared meaning throughout an entire organization.

This study will be of interest and useful to organizations wishing to avoid pitfalls
while attempting to mold group perceptions. It will be a topic of interest to managers
because it involves a quest to gain greater understanding of what can and cannot be
controlled during times of major organizational change. In this case, time and resources
became focused on attempts to control a business computer system's name, rather than on
an understanding of why certain group perceptions and shared meanings were forming
about the system. These efforts hindered the implementation of important business goals.
Attempts to manipulate the situation may have actually contributed to the growth and
strengthening of the Bubba symbolic convergence. Years after these events have taken
place, the same connotations come to mind among those who were present. This
situation evolved, even when various group members may have had little contact with
one another except through the shared experience, stories and frustrations of working towards implementing a new computer system.

Following this introduction, the literature review, research methodology, convergence evolution and implications of this case study are examined in four chapters. The literature review explains the importance and implications of symbolic convergence theory (SCT) and Fantasy theme analysis (FTA), as outlined by Ernest Bormann (1972, 1982, 1983, 1985 & 1997). It also reviews the works of numerous other scholars concerning pertinent matters of conflict, humor, and public relations issues that may have been ignored or not well understood. All of these topics help to strengthen and emphasize the importance of the study. The research methodology is outlined as a postmortem case study, based on a participant observer format. Using semi-structured interviews of those who were present during the evolution of the Bubba symbolic convergence, emergent themes will be identified and analyzed. After the discussion of theory and previous studies, the research methodology and questions are presented.

Answers to two fundamental questions are sought through this study.

Q1: What were perceptions and attitudes toward Bubba regarding the implementation of a new business computer system, and why?

Q2: As a means to support the need for organizational change, how might Bubba have evolved differently?

Although the details and events seen from various viewpoints surrounding the symbolic convergence of Bubba may differ, the concepts and consequences surrounding the situation live on. With this in mind, an understanding of the way in which a symbolic convergence unfolds is necessary.
Chapter One: Literature Review

1.01 Symbolic Convergence Theory, Fantasy Theme Analysis, and Rhetorical Vision

Between 1970 and mid-January of 2004, there have been over 770 works written and published on the subject of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 2003). Within this vast body of work, a great deal of information and study has been generated on the way various figures have been assigned real, as well as fictitious persona, by different groups of people through various forms of media. These studies have also often focused on how the emergence and changing persona of public figures have come about. Though the scope of study has been wide and varied in this arena, political personalities and the study of their media-based persona have been among the more widely studied applications for symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis. With roots based in various forms of conflict, these studies demonstrate an emergence of shared meaning and group consciousness, which is passed from small groups to large groups, and back again through various forms of media (Bormann, 1972, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1997). This review analyzes key elements of extensive work on the topic of Symbolic convergence theory, Fantasy theme analysis, and rhetorical vision, as a precursor to the case study of a new business computer system, which emerged with an unexpected persona during its implementation.

The information examined here, through the work of Ernest Bormann and numerous other scholars, establishes the foundation for a better understanding of how organizational change and conflict resulted in the evolution of a symbolic convergence, and the evolution of various fantasy themes. As a key theme, it also stands as an
enduring reminder of how organizational change can result in unforeseen, unintended results, which given better understanding might be avoidable in the future.

Symbolic convergence theory (SCT) has been described by Bormann (1983), as a social theory of communication, which involves the creation and rising of group consciousness, and the ways in which group consciousness is maintained. Bormann (1985) states,

The power of the theory stems from the human tendency to try to understand events in terms of people with certain personality traits and motivations, making decisions, taking actions, and causing things to happen (p.134).

Symbolic convergence theory has a three-part structure. The first part involves “the discovery and arrangement of recurring communicative forms and patterns that indicate the evolution and presence of a shared group consciousness” (p.129). These can often be seen to manifest themselves as catch phrases or through terms used among group members to express shared meaning.

The second aspect of the symbolic convergence structure is described as consisting of the ways in which a group consciousness comes into being, how it proliferates, falls into decline, then vanishes. It also deals with the effects that a group consciousness has on shared meanings, motives, and the forms of communication that occur within a group. According to Bormann (1985), the basic form of communication becomes a “dynamic of people sharing group fantasies” (p.129). These shared meanings emerge from rhetorical visions, or what can be described in a setting of organizational change as a mission, program, or plans of action that are generally outlined by management to unify a group toward a common cause. When members of an
organization understand and become committed to a rhetorical vision, they carry a shared understanding of group aspirations and goals. Through the acceptance and enactment (Weick, 2001) of these shared goals, organization members become more one as a group, and more effective at achieving those goals.

The third part of symbolic convergence theory is more difficult to develop, since it describes what might cause people to share group fantasies, and under what circumstances. Bormann (1972, 1985, 1997) explains that “fantasy” refers to a shared interpretation of events that fill the rhetorical or psychological needs of a group. These fantasies “often deal with things that have actually happened to members of the group or that are reported in authenticated works of history, in the news media, or in the oral history and folklore of other groups and communities” (1985, p.130).

In his groundbreaking work on the rhetorical criticism of social reality, Bormann (1972) describes fantasy theme analysis as a form of criticism in which the message has a dramatistic form. The characteristics of this form include; the settings or scenes in which the drama takes place, the characters involved with the drama, which include sanctioning agents that lend credibility to the drama, and the actions involved throughout the drama. Fantasy theme analysis accurately describes the way that a symbolic convergence can be seen as taking on a life of its own, through the shared social realities that develop among those involved with the drama at hand.

Bormann (1985) goes on to say “Fantasy themes are always slanted, ordered, and interpreted; they provide a rhetorical means for large segments of the audience to account for and explain the same experiences or events in different ways” (p.134). This manifests itself as the appearance of a group consciousness, having shared emotions,
motives, and meanings. These are not described as merely the interpretations of individuals, but as shared meanings among groups. They are characterized in terms of social narration and shared fantasies.

A symbolic convergence is based on common experience and shared meanings that are formed through a chaining of events and reactions. Shared group fantasies result in a convergence of feelings among those involved, which become difficult for participants to recognize since they become caught up in their shared social realities. These group fantasies and the feelings they ignite are referred to as a fantasy theme.

In recent writings by Stephen Littlejohn (2002) on symbolic convergence theory, he provides definition for another key concept:

A rhetorical vision is essentially a view of how things have been, are, or will be. Rhetorical visions structure our sense of reality in areas that we cannot experience directly but can know by symbolic reproduction. Consequently, such visions give us an image of things in the past, in the future, or in faraway places; in large measure these visions form the assumptions on which a group’s knowledge is based (p.157).

These concepts clearly outline the importance of rhetorical “image” creation, based on perceptions of the past and how it has effected the present. These images then become the basis for what the future might hold in a given set of circumstances.

1.02 Related Research on Homo Narrans, Humor and Conflict

Through the writings of Bormann (1972) on rhetorical vision, symbolic convergence theory (1982, 1983, 1985), and fantasy theme analysis (1985, 1997), the concept of humans communicating as homo narrans emerges. Supporting work has been
done regarding the narrative paradigm and homo narrans (Fisher, 1985; Vasquez, 1993; Heath, 2001). These concepts define humans as narrative storytellers, who share their experiences, their hopes, and their fears. The use of a narrative form indicates humans build group consciousness and create their social realities through story telling and shared fantasies. The notion that one group may see heroes, while another group sees villains in the same circumstance, is an important aspect of these theories. When one group’s heroes can be understood as another group’s villains, it becomes evident that care must be taken to nurture a common rhetorical vision for all groups involved. Bormann (1972, 1985) also indicates the rhetorical visions presented to a group must prepare the group for changes that are about to become a part of their history. The rhetoric must encourage success and project a vision of getting through times of distress by being supportive.

Yet another interesting feature of a symbolic convergence involves the way humor often manifests itself. It can become a mechanism used to purge frustration. John Meyer (1997) points out that humor displays two patterns. One is the perception of a normal pattern, while the other is based on a violation of the normal pattern. This is further described as “humor to unite and divide organization members” (p.204). Duncan (1962) describes laughter as a form of discipline that divides the subject of the remarks from those sharing a laugh at the target’s expense. Meyer (1997) points out that “such humor does help unite those experiencing it. This unification occurs as one group disciplines another through laughter.” He also points out that humor allows “differences to be accepted or negotiated while reemphasizing some common value, providing for both continuity and adaptability in relationships and in the organization” (p.205). This fits Bormann’s explanation of shared humor, or inside jokes and catch phrases becoming
a telltale, unifying, and characteristic trait in the study of symbolic convergence and fantasy theme analysis.

The situations surrounding a symbolic convergence are also demonstrated through traits of contagion theories, as describe by Linda Putnam and Fredric Jablin (2001). This work supports the way shared meanings among groups spread. It "seeks to explain organizational members' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior on the basis of information, attitudes, and behavior of others in the network to whom they are linked" (p.465). According to this view, the contagion of attitudes and behavior among groups would show signs of rubbing off on each other. Experiences shared among members of various groups would echo the same frustrations and feelings to form shared meaning and a group consciousness. Rogers and Kincaid (1981) refers to this as the convergence model of communication. Shared knowledge or frustration due in part to the lack of knowledge, attitudes and behavior can become a shared sense of anxiety.

When the implementation of new technologies becomes a must within any organization, they involve business implications, timelines, and budget issues that are often hard for any one individual to grasp. Any authoritarian-expert approach used to implement new technologies can result in growing conflict and the evolution of fantasy themes. These situations can result in what Morgan (1997) and Goffman (1967) refer to as avoidance rituals. These can occur when organization members find themselves in a position of being responsible for accomplishing assigned tasks with unhappy employees. They occur when organization members steer clear of issues and problems that threaten their independence. These situations can become worse yet; when experienced
employees choose to leave. Managers who are aware of these situations may counter such strategies, but left unattended they can result in the escalation of conflict.

Wilmot and Hocker (2001) address issues of power imbalance, resource control and expertise that also apply to conditions lending themselves to the formation of a symbolic convergence as well. This information indicates high power positions may develop altered views of themselves and other parties. Among the consequences of this are false-feedback concerning self-worth and the development of new values designed to protect power, as well as the devaluing of the less powerful and the avoidance of close social contact with them (Kipnis 1976). These issues may underline what often occurs during times of major organizational change. In these situations, few might dare to voice an opinion for fear of retribution or being dismissed. Wilmot and Hocker (2001) also point out that those with more resource control have higher power, which certainly might lend itself toward differing perceptions of heroes and villains as outlined by Bormann.

With regard to the role conflict can play during the emergence of a symbolic convergence, information published by Gareth Morgan (1997) on interests, conflict, and power applies, as he explains three interconnecting domains when analyzing group interests. These are defined as task interests (regarding work one has to perform), career interests, (aspirations and visions as to what the future may hold), and extramural interests, which shape the way we act in relation to both job and career. Those trying to build a rhetorical vision for an organization need to pay close attention to signals such as an increasing exodus rate. When task, career, and extramural interests begin to conflict with one another, as well as with expectations held by various group members, a sense of
cohesion can begin to change throughout an organization. These are among the issues that may have contributed to the symbolic convergence at XYZ Corporation.

In his work explaining the principles of resolution to conflict, Stewart Levine (1998) touches on issues, which could contribute to the formation of a symbolic convergence as well. He indicates that resources often end up being wasted by those working together because they are not presented with a clear vision of where they are headed or how they should efficiently get there. They become frustrated as they waste time, effort, and resources trying to resolve conflicts that arise due to insufficient or changing direction. Issues of power and conflict in organizational settings can also lean heavily toward the Irving Janis (1982) writings on “groupthink.” On the subject of conformity to group norms, Janis states

The more amiability and esprit de corps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups (p.13).

These issues can become a factor during both the decision-making and implementation phases of any new technology implementation. Conflicts may arise between different groups while each goes though the formation of shared group consciousness. While the rhetorical vision and the lens perspective of some groups may have envisioned the new system as a hero, others with a different lens perspective may have formed a group consciousness, which identified the new system as a villain.

With regard to issues of power and decision-making, Dr. Gary Klein (2001), an expert in the field of how people make decisions, points out that
We have discovered how rarely people are engaged in formal comparisons between options. Although this is a central topic of interest in classical research, we find in field settings that even for very difficult decisions, experienced people generally consider only a single option. Generally, we find option comparison in only about 5% of the decision points we have probed, and others have replicated this finding (p.291-292).

In light of this statement, questions might be raised regarding how thoroughly options were weighed as planning and the rhetorical vision for the new XYZ Corporation computer system was being formulated.

According to Bormann (1972, 1985), if a sense of group consciousness, common ground and the chaining of ideas can be identified across a range of subjects, the basis for a symbolic convergence having occurred can begin to be established. Had more attention been paid to groups internal to the organization, rather than external to it, perhaps the symbolic convergence might have played out differently. With this in mind, a public relations perspective of the situation can be considered.

Research done by Vasquez (1993) on the conceptualization of a homo narrans paradigm for public relations combined Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory with situational theory. The homo narrans perspective explained by Heath (2001) indicates communication processes are central to the way individuals become part of, and communicate as a public from situational perspectives. This information supports the Bormann (1972, 1985) and Vasquez (1993) work regarding the ways in which a symbolic convergence forms. It also provides insight into how key publics can become an
important consideration when studying the formation and consequences of a symbolic convergence.

1.03 Related Research in the Field of Public Relations

Gabriel Vasquez (1994) found that a profile composite could be developed for microsegmented publics, which allows for individual communication behaviors and participation in the formation of a symbolic reality to be analyzed. By identifying and analyzing the key publics involved with the development of the new computer system, it should be possible to determine whether those acting as managers (public relations practitioners) within the XYZ Corporation were targeting certain publics more than others, to the detriment of the organization’s ultimate implementation goals.

If the public relations aspects of the new computer system were directed toward both internal and external publics during the computer systems development, valid issues might have come to light regarding the effect various changes might have had in the shared realities formed among each of the publics involved.

The public relations implications of research by Cragan and Shields (1992, 1995) might indicate the way individuals identify with organizations, perceive their situations, communicate, and form their shared perceptions of reality. This becomes the basis for the way internal and external publics form and interact. The identification bonds and attitudes that individuals and groups (publics) develop toward an organization have a great deal to do with how events are perceived and how meaning becomes a matter of group consciousness. Identification and meaning are shared through communication and dialogue (or lack thereof). Therefore, the importance of the narrative paradigm, and the
concept that homo narrans form and base their shared meanings on stories, becomes stronger and clearer.

Vasquez (1993) realized there were some limitations here however. Symbolic convergence theory as a narrative paradigm can be used for designing message content, but it does not identify the relevant publics that messages might best be targeted toward. Situational theory described by Grunig (1976, 1982) identifies relevant publics and when to direct messages toward them, but it does not deal with the content of messages. By combining the two, Vasquez determined that a homo narrans perspective would allow researchers and practitioners to view message exchange between organizations and publics as forms of stories through a narrative paradigm. Specific communication might need to be put together and targeted toward each of these publics as a means of informing, controlling, monitoring and evaluating their effects and desired outcomes. This is an important concept since during times of new technology implementation, relevant publics may need to be carefully identified and considered so that an appropriate rhetorical vision might be tailored toward relevant publics.

Fisher (1985) described the narrative paradigm as having its roots in philosophy and issues dealing with human, social interaction (ontology). As storytellers, humans interpret and pass on their experiences so others might understand and sanction the information by passing it on to others. This reinforces Bormann’s (1972, 1985) work through notions of building group consciousness. From a public relations standpoint, the sharing and passing on of information fits nicely into Grunig’s models (Grunig, 1992; Heath, 2001) of press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical models. Had less press agentry and public information been used, and more
two-way symmetrical communication been used, the fantasy themes surrounding Bubba may have chained out quite differently.

Cragan & Shields (1992, 1995) used Fantasy theme analysis in corporate planning and applied research to address issues of identity, positioning, and market segmentation. With a better understanding of this research, managers trying to create more effective rhetorical visions may be able to bolster the development and implementation of new technologies. The careful identification of key stakeholders and recognition of their contributions to the organization’s success might be used to build stronger bonds between internal and external publics. If this is not the case, the evolution of a symbolic convergence may serve to move the organization’s key publics further apart rather than bring them together. The potentially negative aspects of implementing new technologies might be reduced when organization leaders better understand the benefits of paying close attention to the needs and expectations of their internal and external publics.

There does not appear to be a great deal of communication research relating the successful development of new business computer systems and the topic of symbolic convergence theory. Chesbore & Bonsel (1989) examined the growing popularity and potential communication implications the personal computer was beginning to have on society. This work did not address whether a computer system might become the focus for an evolving symbolic convergence within an organization. In the mid 1970s, a computer program was developed and investigated by Dr. Donald Shields of the University of Missouri at St. Louis, and Dr. John Cragan of Illinois State University for the generation of more effective political speeches (Greene, 1979). The focus for this computer-based research was on the creation of more effective speeches rather than to
study the reasons for how or why a persona might be assigned to a business computer system.

1.04 Applications to the Implementation of New Computer Systems

Though it does not appear that Symbolic convergence theory has been used to analyze the implementation of a new business computer system prior to this, there has been a fair amount of study done regarding computer system acceptance in the field of information technology (IT). Some of this research focuses on the acceptance of new technologies, and this area of study would appear to have important implications regarding the emergence of a symbolic convergence.

Fred Davis (1989) developed the technology acceptance model (TAM) to predict information system acceptance that would allow for system design changes before users are exposed to direct experience with a new system. The basic premise becomes the trial of new systems and their alternatives to check for appropriate performance. This is opposed to going with one solution and trying to make it work, regardless of whether it meets acceptable performance levels. This information also supports the concept that usefulness of any information technology system has more to do with usage behavior than ease of use. New technology implementations within organizations will hold usefulness as an asset among internal publics as long as they live up to the rhetorical vision created by their developers. If a business environment offers little opportunity to apply tools like the TAM model, aggravation and anxiety build when implementation delays occur and promise dates given to external ‘stakeholder’ publics are missed. Other considerations in the literature for IT acceptance include the focus of such models on systems that are already running and in use, or on systems which user participants were
already familiar. In their research on the role of IT usage and prior experience, Taylor and Todd (1995) state,

It is unclear: (1) whether models such as TAM are predictive of behavior for inexperienced users and more importantly, (2) whether the determinants of IT usage are the same for experienced and inexperienced users of a system (p.561).

In the realm of assessing IT usage, these researchers studied information technology acceptance by users with and without various levels of prior experience. This is an important consideration in the development and implementation of any new computer system, especially if those in charge may have ignored the importance of issues relating to their public's acceptance of a new technology, based on a lack of familiarity and training. The implication here would be, if those in charge of new technology implementation ignore the importance of an internal public's acceptance of a new technology, their efforts may result in rejection and turmoil. High levels of frustration with an unfamiliar technology may contribute to lower levels of acceptance, and higher levels of dissatisfaction that ultimately result in an unforeseen exodus of organization members.

According to recently published information on the use of technology in the workplace, by researchers at Syracuse University (Stanton, 2004), some estimates put the number of failed information technology (IT) projects as high as 75 percent. The reasons for IT project failure ranged from issues of complexity and usability to employee resistance to change. This research also suggests that IT projects may fail because IT specialists make up a distinct subculture within an organization, one that is often in conflict with users and managers.
Another aspect of conflict that may have been a factor during the symbolic convergence at XYZ Corporation involved resource allocation. Information published by Molta (1999), states resource allocation is by nature political and by nature covers decision-making considerations for managers in the information technology (IT) field. Alliance maneuvering can diminish the probability that IT decisions will be made rationally, with the end result being based on the assessment of costs and benefits. Molta points out that IT decision-making should be more than simple cost/benefit analysis, and that non-technical factors affect decisions as well. He indicates these decisions can affect an organization's politics and structure, and during times of major organizational change these points are valid considerations.

Can all of these considerations be factors in the formation of a symbolic convergence, where the central figure was a business computer system? This study represents a unique set of circumstances, in that a persona appeared to have been assigned to a business computer system. During a time of major organizational change, the conflicts, frustrations and anxieties that emerged during the system's development and implementation gave rise to a symbolic convergence. A sense of shared meaning and group consciousness took shape in a way that has been studied and described by numerous scholars on the basis of persona being assigned to people and social movements. Little attention has been paid to the possibility of something similar occurring during the implementation of a business computer system. Though everyone knew the system at XYZ Corporation was an inanimate object, it became the focus for what was to become a dramatic series of events. These events involved the creation of a rhetorical vision. A vision that was to be passed on to larger groups, and one that would
stress not only the importance of the new system’s implementation, but also how it was to be accomplished, in what time frame, and by whom. These issues lend themselves toward the discussion of conflict and differing perspectives.

In outlining the lens model of conflict, Wilmot & Hocker (2001) identify how perceptions form and combine to create the fundamental views in all conflicts. The three fundamental features that contribute to conflicts are outlined as

(1) The communicative acts (behaviors) of each person,

(2) The meanings (attributions) attached to those acts by each person, each person’s view of self and each person’s views of the other

(3) The meanings (attributions) that two people ascribe to their relationship, including past events, current events and future projections (p.27)

This indicates shared meanings are formed based on different attributions and perceptions, which are assigned first by individuals. Each person’s perception is then formed using a different “lens”. Those that form similar perceptions can form shared meanings that develop and spread among group members, which then can chained out in exactly the way Bormann describes in his writings on symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis. As groups begin to identify elements of shared meaning and develop a sense of group consciousness, it can help them cope with conflict, reduce levels of uncertainty, and make sense of the situation at hand (Weick, 2001).

A symbolic convergence can emerge as a unique force, resulting from issues of conflict and power. On the subject of Ernest Bormann’s (1972, 1982, 1985) symbolic convergence theory, Steven Corman (1995) explains “fantasy themes are creative and imaginative interpretations of events that are chained out in social settings. When a
number of fantasy themes merge, they form a rhetorical vision” that sustains formal and informal groups. Symbolic convergence theory attends to the dramatic aspects – for example, sagas, narratives, heroes, villains, inside jokes – that foster common understandings within work groups, departments, and entire organizations (Cragan & Shields, 1981)” (p.19).

This may have been the case when a symbolic convergence evolved during the creation and implementation of a new business computer system called Bubba. The new system gained a persona that was beyond the control of those trying to get the system up and running. With little understanding or background regarding the importance of creating a strong rhetorical vision, attempts would be made to change the situation, but to no avail. In retrospect, research will show that all of the elements were in place to identify the fact that a symbolic convergence had taken place. What may have been missing at the time was an understanding of what could or could not be done to alter the situation.

A rich field of literature exists regarding symbolic convergence theory and how matters of conflict can be associated. Though this work is primarily centered on Ernest Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory, fantasy theme analysis, and writings on rhetorical vision, the theoretical perspective of this narrative, postmortem case study is further grounded in the writings of numerous other renowned scholars. With over 770 pieces of literature in print to date, on symbolic convergence theory and Fantasy theme analysis, this study is intended to help stand as further testament to the usefulness and boundless applications for Bormann’s work.
1.05 Research Methodology

The rationale for this post-mortem, case study research is to better understand why and how the negative aspects of the symbolic convergence evolved (Bormann, 1985, 1997). The situation took place in a large business firm that was implementing a new business computer system. Researching the matter is of use and interest because it resulted in unintended, costly consequences for the organization as the result of a social phenomenon. Due to the circumstances that evolved, more and more organization members chose to leave the organization, while those that remained had a difficult time making sense of what was happening (Weick, 2001). If a better understanding of why the symbolic convergence occurred can be gained, perhaps similar situations can be avoided. With this in mind, the first of two fundamental research questions becomes:

Q1: What were perceptions and attitudes toward Bubba regarding the implementation of a new business computer system, and why?

In order to answer this question, an understanding must be gained of how and why the symbolic convergence of Bubba evolved in the first place. The first goal of this study is to form an understanding of how and why negative attitudes and perceptions toward a business computer system developed. Once this is achieved, the second goal is to propose ways in which the situation might have been avoided. Since new business computer systems are being developed and implemented every day around the world, better understandings of what effects the process can have on individuals, groups and organizations as a whole will benefit the knowledge base of all involved. When interesting social phenomenon occur, it raises levels of interest. When the phenomena results in organizational goals being at odds with individual member sensemaking and
identity, the situation becomes even more interesting. The benefits of better understanding lead to our reasons for further study, and the methods we chose to gain that understanding.

This research design uses a participant observer methodology (Berger, 2000; Babbie, 2001; Creswell, 1998). Since this involves high activity and low secrecy, participants in the Bubba convergence would be familiar with the participant observer (Lee, 1999). Taking notes and asking questions of those involved in the development of the Bubba system provides an “as seen” and “as used” account of how Bubba evolved. It is believed that researching Bubba in this manner would be most effective since the observer was present from the early stages of evolution. Since the convergence and history of Bubba can only be related through the stories of others “after-the-fact”, present-day participation alone would be far less effective. With the researcher being a participant, the Hawthorne effect becomes a non-issue since the evolution of a symbolic convergence cannot be predicted. The participants would not know a convergence was going to occur, or that a post-mortem case study would take place. This means there would be no opportunity for behavior changes to take place due to the study, which might affect their performance or the convergence outcome. The organization being studied and all participants are assured of confidentiality through the use of fictitious identifiers and institutional review board protocols.

Bormann (1985, 1997) explains that a symbolic convergence involves group members who experience their shared consciousness without a realization that it is even happening. This raises an important question concerning a researcher’s ability to effectively study a symbolic convergence from a participant observer’s standpoint.
How can a participant who is caught up in day-to-day events as they occur, effectively research and analyze what was happening? Since a symbolic convergence cannot be predicted, the only practical way to study a given situation is through a postmortem case study. By recognizing the signs that a convergence has taken place, and analyzing these events after the fact, valuable lessons can perhaps be learned from things that failed to go as planned. In retrospect, information can be gathered and analyzed from first-hand accounts of those who were involved with the situation in question. If consensus among fantasy themes can be identified regarding the positive and negative experiences of group members, new and informative insight can often be gained.

It was only during graduate studies in the field of communication, several years after the events took place at XYZ Corporation, that this researcher understood an organization he had been involved with had experienced all of the aspects of a symbolic convergence as outlined by Bormann. This research will help identify whether events chained through various groups to form a sense of shared consciousness, even when various groups may not have been in direct contact with one another except through the shared experience of implementing a new business computer system. At the same time it can shed light on what might have been done differently to match the shared meanings formed among group members with managers who were trying to promote their vision for organizational goals.

The symbolic convergence of Bubba will be examined through interviews of those involved with the implementation of a new, computerized information management system. Evidence of the fantasy themes involved will emerge from information shared by past and present XYZ Corporation organization members. They represent different
departments, which had different perspectives on how the new system did and did not meet organizational expectations. In recent writings on symbolic convergence, Littlejohn (2002) states the following:

A rhetorical vision is essentially a view of how things have been, are, or will be. Rhetorical visions structure our sense of reality in areas that we cannot experience directly but can know by symbolic reproduction. Consequently, such visions give us an image of things in the past, in the future, or in faraway places; in large measure these visions form assumptions on which a group’s knowledge is based. (p. 157)

If organization members were having difficulty making sense of, or identifying with the organization’s implementation activities surrounding the Bubba fantasy-theme, a better understanding of their perceptions might point to ways of avoiding similar circumstances in the future (Weick, 2002; Bullis & Bach, 1989, Cheney, 1983; Cheney & Tompkins, 1987).

With this in mind, the second research question becomes:

Q2: As a means to support the need for organizational change, how might Bubba have evolved differently?

This question is important because those involved with the Bubba fantasy-theme covered a wide range of departments; each having different perspectives and understandings of what was going on around them. If common themes and understandings can be identified through inquiry and emergent theme identification, perhaps others finding themselves in similar circumstances can amplify the positive aspects and avoid the negative ones. This research will be useful to organizations willing to admit that the success of any goal
hinges on shared perceptions and shared visions of what constitute reasonable implementation methods.

1.06 Description of the Research Respondents

A group of twenty former and present employees of the XYZ Corporation were selected to be interview participants. The participants represent a cross-section of those involved with the implementation of the new information system, which became unofficially known as Bubba. The participants represent staff members from manufacturing engineering, information systems, manufacturing, product engineering and quality assurance. To insure all participants were organization members during the implementation of the new system, they had to be employees with YYZ Corporation during or after the year 1995. Each participant had varying levels of exposure to the new system. Participant experience with the system ranges from direct use (through data entry and training), to indirect knowledge (being told about how the system will benefit the organization).

Even those who might appear to be less involved with the system implementation will have a good deal to share about the Bubba phenomenon, since promises of system capability and numerous timetable delays all played a role in the formation of the Bubba fantasy theme. During the new system development several participants were compelled to leave the organization, while some remain with the organization today, working with the system that continues to evolve.

The research instrument used to study the Bubba fantasy theme is based on retrospective, semi-structured interviews. A total of twelve probing questions were designed, with each allowing the participants to share their views and feelings on the
evolution of Bubba. Eight questions were open-ended to allow participants to tell their story. Four questions were more specific. These were intended to help reveal aspects of the Bubba convergence, which involved sub-themes that emerged as part of the fantasy theme.

Research information was gathered in the form of written notes taken during private, personal interviews, as well as from transcribed tape recordings of each interview. The interview information was then reviewed and coded by the researcher to explore common themes raised by the participants. Based on the coding process, recurrent themes were categorized and analyzed to identify the basis for the symbolic convergence.

To further support the notion that narrative analysis is a viable and powerful means to answer the research questions, in discussion on interview structuring, Lee (1999) points out, "A recovered narrative can often stimulate insight into the explanations for an organizational phenomenon of interest" (p. 93). Though interview information is always at the mercy of sincerity and honesty issues, face-to-face interviews for information gathering are preferred as opposed to surveys because the researcher can often detect nuances that documents alone cannot convey.

Because this case study is post-mortem, and is based on events that occurred four or more years prior to the research, there can certainly be issues raised regarding the accuracy of participant memory. This issue is addressed through triangulation using turning points and text analysis. According to research based on turning point analysis (Bullis & Bach, 1989) memorable events can be identified through common experiences
and perceptions. Though absolute details may not be accurately recalled from one participant to the next due to the passage of time, the turning points that remain in the memories of those involved with an event become strengthened through the supporting views and memories of others. When the same general themes emerge, validity is strengthened. Especially when the supporting views of others were not based on close proximity to one another, creating a possible influence. This situation exists with the Bubba fantasy-theme, since any of the participants were from different departments, buildings, divisions and states.

Physical text evidence such as newsletters and business memos can be analyzed and used as supporting evidence. On the subject of textual analysis, Berger (2000) indicates, “oppositions hidden in the text generates meaning” (p. 46). When related text documents such as house organs are analyzed in conjunction with the shared narrative evidence of common themes and turning points, validity is bolstered from a triangulation standpoint. Multiple sources and multiple methods further support the efficacy of the study. The evolution of the Bubba fantasy-theme can be viewed as sharing aspects from several different fields of research including socialization and identification, power, sensemaking, decision-making, groupthink, turning points, and matters concerning implications in public relations.

With this in mind, a logical research approach becomes the use of triangulation, where the use of different sources, methods, investigators and theories can be used (Creswell, 1998). This allows mixed formats to be used to strengthen a case. Text sources can be used to corroborate what the stories of participants reveal. In this case, the emergent understandings gained using symbolic convergence theory (fantasy theme
analysis) are combined with textual analysis to form a unified, stronger argument for findings and recommendations.

As the participant’s stories are being told, thick description and detail are used so the reader gets a better picture of the circumstances being described. Strong connections between common stories and text evidence are then used to help draw out the shared meanings and understandings. Much like strong valence bonds that can occur when chemicals combine to form new substances, triangulation helps strengthen bonds between social phenomenon and pieces of textual evidence that support the participant’s stories. The different supporting research frameworks can also be understood as representing the parts of a chair. Each leg lends support to the platform or seat of the argument. The stronger each leg is, and the more evenly each leg is matched to their companion supports, the more stable the seat becomes. A strong and stable platform helps establish an argument that the chair will be useful for its intended purpose.

The validity of the argument is found in comparison to other similar designs that have been used in the past. Similar designs with a history of standing up well over time become supporting precedent. Usefulness becomes a matter of a design’s intended purpose matching the perceptions of those doing any evaluation. If a chair matches the perception people have of its intended use, and it appears to be stable and strong, it will be perceived to be a valid foundation for seating. How reliable a structure might be is another question. Whether the subject in question is a chair and it’s supporting legs, or the supporting legs found in social research, questions of reliability need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. The validity of any design can be established by comparison to past designs. The reliability of a design can only be based on individual circumstances.
A chair might be designed on sound principles, but if improper materials are used for construction, it may not provide reliable support as a foundation for safe seating. Much like issues of reliability in chair design, the information gathered and assembled during this social research can be considered valid based on past principles, but only under the circumstances in which they occurred. The lessons learned from this research design can certainly be considered useful, but the work cannot be considered generalizable. The good news is, with the proliferation of new business computer systems there may be more similar circumstances available for study than is realized. When one phenomenon is studied and becomes better understood, subsequent researchers have an opportunity to benefit from the past experience of others.

1.07 Methods Summary

This study will help answer the research questions by identifying patterns and common themes among the stories told by the participants. These themes not only identify the essence of the convergence; they begin to define the interpretations made by organization members as a whole. According to Weick (2001),

Individual human beings send and receive information and in other ways carry out the interpretation process. Organization theorists realize that organizations do not have mechanisms separate from individuals to set goals, process information, or perceive the environment. People do these things. (p. 243)

In this light, the stories of individuals from the XYZ Corporation come together to reveal a bigger picture of how a convergence took place around the development of a new computer system. These stories are from a range of organization members, which are compared and explored for similarities and differences. The information is reduced and
categorized to become the foundation for emergent themes. These themes form the basis for analysis of what ideas, understandings and themes became group concepts, and which of these were unique.
Q1: What comes to mind with the term "Bubba"?

Q2: How did Bubba affect your feelings toward the XYZ Corp. computer system?

Q3: How do you feel the system acquired its identity?

Q4: How did the name affect your attitude toward the system?

Q5: How was the new name given to the new information system?
   a) What was the new name?

Q6: What does the acronym B.I.M.B.O. stand for?

Q7: What comes to mind with the phrase, "That's the beauty of the system".

Q8: How do you believe others felt about Bubba?

Q9: What did the acronym M.A.M.I.S. stand for?

Q10: What aspects of Bubba would you have changed if you could?

Why?

Notes, Comments and Observations: (use back of page or additional pages as necessary)
During the 1990s, a sizable window and door manufacturing organization, known as XYZ Corporation, found itself in need of replacing an outdated management information system (MIS). This organization referred to the system as MAMIS, an acronym that stood for manufacturing, accounting, and management information system. The MAMIS system was fast running out of capacity to deal with new product offerings, and it did not have the ability to provide adequate information for the fast growing organization’s needs. Much like an overloaded telephone system that runs out of new numbers available for new customers, the MAMIS system was running out of capacity to deal with the addition of new product part numbers and the effective tracking of inventory.

A plan was created to replace this old system with a new information technology (IT) system that would be better suited to accommodate current and future growth needs. One of the stories circulated throughout the organization referred to this situation as the impending extinction of the woolly MAMIS. This analogy clearly referred to the extinction of the prehistoric, tusked, elephant-like creature referred to as woolly mammoth. A creature thought to have met its demise by not being able to adapt to a changing global environment. Such was the case with MAMIS. Since no information system is complete or perfect, one of the important decisions to be made became whether to buy and customize existing off-the-shelf software or to create custom software that would be specific to the organization’s needs. This process required input from every department in the organization, to make sure the needs of most would be met.
A relatively minor part of this decision and creation process involved picking an appropriate name for the new system, a name that would be fitting for the replacement of MAMIS, a rallying point. Early on, the name “Sharp Tack” was adopted but during attempts to officially register the term it was discovered the name was already reserved and in use by the automotive industry. What began as an innocent gesture of humor regarding the new IT (information technology) system name was to become an unforeseen annoyance and distraction to management. The term Bubba was proposed in jest by one of the top managers, and though it was never an official name for the new system, the name caught on and became widely used and an increasingly popular term.

Decisions were made among top managers to create the new software system in-house, and this work was to be overseen by experts brought in, who had created a similar system for a competing organization. Creation and implementation of this system would be a huge undertaking, and it would require extraordinary time and effort from every department to get it up and running. To most staff throughout the organization, it appeared an arbitrary completion date was picked to “go live” with the system. Next, an arbitrary, aggressive time line was created to fit between the existing calendar date and the “go live” date. Though there were certain people hired and assigned to this major project full-time, there were other tasks assigned throughout different departments, which would be required of staff in addition to their regular project workload.

Management determined the product development/engineering group would be assigned the task of entering formulas into the new system for all existing and new product component sizes. These tasks would be assigned based on priority provided by upper management. As the work progressed, frustration grew and the term Bubba
became less a term of humor and one more of frustration and disdain. The engineering
group would point out formula features the system lacked, which should be added for
simplification and convenience in future use and expansion.

Unfortunately, since the software developers were also under pressure most of
their solutions became “we need to work with what we have.” Rather than working
together toward an efficient new system that would be as user friendly as possible, the
system was becoming another throwback to the age of dinosaurs. On occasion staff
would lament that that perhaps MAMIS was not so bad after all. Simple if/then
arguments could not be entered, so long bracketed formulas had to be written for
otherwise routine tasks. Frustration grew since there were also limits to the number of
characters a formula could use. Those involved knew that tasks, which could be
accomplished by low cost, over-the-counter spreadsheet software, could not be
accomplished by the new system being developed. Under these circumstances, the
fantasy theme of Bubba continued to grow. Though the official system name was less an
issue than getting a functioning system up and working, the term and tone Bubba was
beginning to take on gained the attention of upper management.

A company-wide contest was organized to find a new name for the developing
system. A small cash prize would be awarded. Once the new official name was chosen,
it was to be used exclusively when anyone referred to the new system. Some years later,
it is interesting to note that few that have left the organization seem to recall the official
acronyms used, or what they may have stood for, but the term Bubba lives on. It should
be pointed out that the window and door manufacturer this occurred with is under new
ownership, and many involved with Bubba have moved on to other employers. The system once widely known as Bubba still evolves today.

The problems, which evolved surrounding the Bubba fantasy theme, were based on issues of power; and groupthink that led to turning points among disgruntled employees and an exodus of staff from the organization. Dissatisfaction grew as engineering staff who were hired to design and develop new products were assigned long hours of mundane keyboard work on top of their regular project assignments. This duty led to increasing dissatisfaction. In one department the growing dislike for Bubba resulted in four engineers resigning and one being dismissed in a five-month period. This represented a major portion of a department that initially consisted of eight engineers, three draftsmen, three lab technicians, one secretary, and one department manager. Other departments throughout the organization were being affected in similar ways. Top executives dictated timetables and tasks that allowed them to tell their superiors what they wanted to hear. Distortions regarding how quickly the project could be completed and how smoothly it was going were becoming evident throughout the ranks. This background formed the basis for the Bubba fantasy theme analysis.

2.02 The Bubba Symbolic Convergence

This study examines the evolution of the Bubba fantasy theme in three levels; with the first being the decision making process, where the planning and resource allocation phase took place. The second level analyzes the evolution of the main fantasy themes, and the third level reviews the consequences and legacy of the project. Had a different approach been taken to implement the replacement for MAMIS, the fantasy
theme of Bubba might not have evolved as it did. To this day, the term Bubba carries a unique meaning to a number of people that worked with the XYZ Corporation.

As this study unfolds, evidence mounts that issues concerning power and conflict were the cause, while Bubba became the effect. The owners of XYZ Corporation knew they had to replace their aging computer information system to remain competitive and prepare for future growth. The need for better tracking of orders, materials, accounting information and product engineering information were among the driving forces behind the decisions for organizational change.

One of the first key decisions to be made by top management at XYZ Corporation, was whether to buy existing software and have it tailored to meet growing company information system needs, or to hire experts to write and maintain custom software internally. The decision was made to hire experts to develop the new system in-house. Due to economic considerations, the resources needed to implement these organizational goals would have to be reallocated from within. The reallocation of resources, coupled with aspects of power, conflict and groupthink would set the stage for the evolution of Bubba.

Perhaps the weighing of two system options as “buy and customize” versus “write from scratch” indicated a higher level of decision consideration, but in retrospect, from an “outsiders” view, the reasons for developing a system internally, from scratch remain questionable.

Issues of power and control began to surface as the new information system began to take shape. Several among the staff speculated that in order for the current CEO to please his superiors, timetables for the project’s completion were being created on the
basis of telling people what they wanted to hear, rather than the realities of what it would take to get the work done. There did not appear to be genuine attempts made to listen to the input being provided by those who had to do the work. Engineers that were hired to do product development work were being assigned keyboarding positions as a primary duty, and consequently within a five-month period, one engineer was dismissed and four engineers announced they were leaving the company. In a department that originally had eight engineers to begin with, those that were left behind were obviously being left in a lurch. The attitude of top management being “my way or the highway” was taking an obvious toll.

If top management had been paying attention to the rapid exodus rate, and the underlying reasons for the exodus, they might have realized there was perhaps something wrong with their methodology. Engineering staff with four-year degrees and experience in the field of window and door design are not abundant, and after one or two announced their departure a red flag might have been raised to try and understand the issues. These professionals did not join the organization to become full-time keypunch operators. The mandatory shifts in duty, with no voice in the matter became the signal for these employees that it was time to look elsewhere as task; career and extramural interests were being shifted. This also became an issue involving the control of scarce resources as well. The expert hired to lead the creation of this new information system was being given what appeared to be absolute control over staff resources in every department. This created frustration for departmental managers as well, since their people were the ones becoming frustrated enough to leave. These managers were finding themselves in a position of being responsible for accomplishing assigned tasks with unhappy employees,
or worse yet, reduced staff since experienced employees were moving on. The CEO had given the expert hired to implement the new system the power to reallocate the scarce resources of various departments. At the same time, department managers and their staff were generally being expected to maintain their normal project loads and all timelines for completion.

Aspects of self, meaning, and meanings in the relationship with regard to the new power structure and atmosphere of conflict at the XYZ Corporation resulted in a number of staff reevaluating their relationship with the organization. When a perception exists that an organization cares less for the employee relationship, the employee sense of self may question the meanings (attributions) attached to those acts. At XYZ Corporation, this was resulting in increased turnover rates, without the apparent concern of upper management.

Issues of power imbalance, resource control and expertise apply to the XYZ Corporation situation as well, since high power positions may develop altered views of themselves and other parties. These issues describe what many perceived was happening throughout the organization. No one dared voice an opinion for fear of retribution or being dismissed. Those with more resource control have higher power and this was certainly the case. If the experts hired to create the system felt more time or staff resources were needed to accomplish their goals, these resources were assigned to the task, often regardless of how it might affect other organizational goals. If anyone questioned schedules or reassignments, they were marked as not being a “team player”. This new attitude from top management made it increasingly difficult for long-time employees to maintain a sense of identification with the organization.
Another aspect of the XYZ Corporation situation involved resource allocation. Resource allocation is by nature political and by nature covers decision-making considerations for managers in the information technology (IT) field. Alliance maneuvering can diminish the probability that IT decisions will be made rationally, ending up being based on the assessment of costs and benefits. It is important to recognize that IT decision-making should be more than simple cost/benefit analysis, and that non-technical factors affect decisions as well. Such decisions can affect an organization's politics and structure, and from the circumstances experienced at XYZ Corporation, these points are valid.

Issues of power and conflict also lean heavily toward the notion of "groupthink", which describes the atmosphere created under the new power structure established at XYZ Corporation. Those in charge of getting the new (and as yet officially unnamed) information technology system up and running were essentially given free reign and power over whatever resources they needed to accomplish those goals in the time frames established by those not directly involved with doing the work. It appeared that upper levels of management were forced into a groupthink paradigm which was being passed on throughout the organization in order to meet deadlines and goals established by unknown forces further up the corporate ladder.

The information outlined and examined here resulted in a symbolic convergence. The single word, Bubba, would be destined to emerge as an enduring reminder of how power, conflict and groupthink can evolve into an uncontrollable fantasy theme.

As employee resource duties were shifted in various departments, the specialists and professionals hired to perform certain tasks were reassigned to new tasks that
amounted to becoming data entry clerks. As the new system began to take shape, so did discontent. Early in the project, management had attempted to create an identity for the system by calling it “Sharp Tack”. As it turned out, Sharp Tack was already a registered trade name for an Oldsmobile truck drivetrain, so another name had to be found. In total jest during one of the planning meetings, one of the top managers used the name Bubba to identify the new system. Word of this humorous term spread throughout the organization and it began to catch on though everyone knew there would be some new “official” name coined in the future. As time went on, the need to dispel pent-up frustration through humor resulted in the evolution of the fantasy theme known as Bubba.

Unfortunately, the principles of resolution to conflict were nowhere in sight during the evolution of Bubba. Had they been considered, the concept of communicating effectively and using resources efficiently certainly would have helped avoid what was to come. As staff members became more disillusioned with unrealistic goals and expectations, the consequences and legacy of Bubba began to take a stronger hold. System experts continued to tell top management what they wanted to hear; that unrealistic goals and timetables were being met, when in many cases they indeed were not. When goals were repeatedly missed and pushed back, there were any number of excuses used and expectations among staff were that they would become scapegoats.

Ernest Bormann’s (1985) fantasy theme theory accurately describes the way Bubba began to take on a life of its own. In his article titled, “Symbolic convergence theory: A Communication Formulation” he states, “The power of the theory stems from the human tendency to try to understand events in terms of people with certain
personality traits and motivations, making decisions, taking actions, and causing things to happen.

The application of these theory traits seemed evident in the way power and resource controls were being used at XYZ Corporation. Several aspects of Bubba as a fantasy theme became evident as frustrations grew throughout the XYZ Corporation. The creation and implementation of Bubba was being forcefully put upon each department. If department managers were being given any more sense of what the "big picture" was for Bubba's implementation, it was not being effectively shared with the rank and file who were being required to do the work.

The second aspect of symbolic convergence structure is described as consisting of the way a group consciousness arises, continues, declines, disappears, and the way this helps form a sense of group consciousness. Group consciousness definitely was forming around the issues, which the one word term Bubba implied. Since each department in one way or another relied on the efforts of other departments to complete and maintain their portion of the new information system, each department was forming their own viewpoint and opinion regarding the impact of Bubba. This led to a sharing of group fantasies, which appeared to be strangely the same from person to person and from department to department. This may have been the result of power and conflict resentment building as outside "experts" were given free range to reallocate resources within the organization, without what appeared to be an honest effort to listen to the questions and concerns of the rank and file.

The third part of symbolic convergence is described as consisting of factors that explain why people share the fantasies. This aspect of the Bubba fantasy theme is
demonstrated through spin-off terms that began to evolve when the tasks of dealing with Bubba were at hand. One situation involved the repeated use of the phrase, “That’s the beauty of the system.” This phrase was originally used to explain how part of the information system would be able to report material usage and flag inventory needs. As time went on, the engineering group responsible for entering component part length formulas into the system became frustrated with deficiencies in the systems' ability to handle simple formula information. For instance, when it became evident that the new system was not capable of using if-then statements to do product size calculations when necessary, the catch phrase “That’s the beauty of the system” was used among members of the organization in a sarcastic manner, to share their frustration. Further evidence of Bormann's Fantasy Theme describes the use of the “inside joke” as a trigger.

Another example of this arose with a spreadsheet computer program that one of the staff engineers created to accomplish much of what the Bubba system could not for a sister company of XYZ Corporation. The creator of the spreadsheet program called it “B.I.M.B.O.”, which as an acronym that meant, “Bet It Makes Bubba Obsolete.” The fact Bubba could not deal with fundamental mathematical functions like if/then statements had already spawned inside jokes like “That’s the beauty of the system.” Now the sarcasm was expanding into new forms of humor to compliment the rancor that Bubba was rapidly earning.

The rhetoric surrounding Bubba was rapidly gaining negative connotations. With spreading word of more and more system deficiencies, unrealistic timelines being arbitrarily set by managers not knowing what it might take to complete the work, and
mandatory overtime hours being posted to get the system running, the fantasy theme that Bubba represented was gaining momentum.

As the Bubba convergence spread, the shared knowledge (or frustration due in part to the lack thereof), attitudes, and behavior were becoming a shared sense of anxiety. As inter-departmental staff saw signs of groupthink spreading throughout management to get the system up and running, regardless whether anyone thought it was possible given the arbitrary timelines, and as no one dared speak up without fear of retribution, the fantasy theme continued to grow.

As word was spreading throughout the XYZ Corporation of how Bubba was being implemented, the lack of a rhetorical vision regarding how things “have been, are and will be” was turning the term Bubba into a one word focus for disparity. In order to cope, sarcastic humor was being used among staff to help get through the required tasks.

Whispers and rumors of various staff members interviewing and looking elsewhere were beginning to circulate. At the same time, talk among the rank-and-file was questioning whether the long-term goals and good of the organization were really being put first. Perhaps the short-term gains of the experts put in power to get a new system up and running was at the root of what seemed to be unrealistic deadlines and workloads. By this time, the fantasy theme surrounding the single word Bubba had taken on a life of its own throughout the XYZ Corporation. Though there was little anyone could do to change the convergence that had taken place by this time, this did not stop attempts by top management to address the symptoms rather than cure the illness. Much like what might be expected among those who have joined forces against an opponent in
combat, the consequences and legacy of Bubba would be destined to become a term that still brings feelings and attitudes to mind among those who were involved.

The term Bubba had come to represent the wielding of power and conflict related to resource allocation in getting a new information system up and running, regardless of what others thought of the process. The groupthink that occurred among managers and staff for fear of retribution was to become the cause for exodus and dismissals.

As ill connotations grew surrounding Bubba, management decided a name change was becoming a must and the use of the name Bubba must be stopped. A company-wide contest was announced that would be held to choose an official name for the new system. Whoever submitted the name that management most liked, would be awarded a small cash prize and forever more the new name would be used to identify the new information system. A winner was picked and it was announced that the term “Sharp Tack” was to be used to identify the new system. Interestingly, it seems the term Bubba became an even stronger term used to rally around the unpleasant cause after the system was renamed. In fact, to this day the term Bubba lives on among those who were present during the system implementation struggles of the late 1990s.

In memos and formal meetings the term would be used as the system continued to develop. In private circles however, the term Bubba was used regularly because staff members identified the term with the evolution of plight and humor. Top management could officially call the new system anything they chose, but soon it became apparent they would never be able to stop the use of the term Bubba.

Among the consequences of resource reallocation while implementing the new system, was the slowing of progress on product development projects. As more time was
allocated for Bubba, less was available for the day-to-day product development work the staff was originally hired to perform. Over a five-month period, one engineer was dismissed for not meeting what many felt were unrealistic expectations, and four others (including the author) announced their departure from the company. This resource loss would also have an impact on the completion of required system tasks in other departments. Since much of the implementation plan for (a.k.a. Bubba) was dependent on the sequential completion and input of system data, other departments were feeling greater pressure to complete unrealistic goals. When timeline goals in various departments were missed, finger pointing and a general degradation of team identification took place.

Though during departmental meetings, where staff engineers could vent frustrations to the department manager, it became apparent that any attempt to focus on interdependence as a power balancing issue was being squelched by groupthink. The top management attitude of "my way or the highway" had left staff with the feeling there was little opportunity for change without leaving the organization. As discontent grew and the exodus of key employees continued, already aggressive timeline goals were being missed and those further up the chain of command, which had previously been told what they wanted to hear were becoming impatient. As time went on, and broken promises regarding system implementation and performance continued, the expert hired to oversee the creation of Bubba left the organization. Unfortunately, it came to light after the system manager departed from XYZ Corporation, that the expert put in charge of creating the new in-house system was involved with litigation by a former employer regarding information system problems. Had more in-depth screening of past history and
credentials taken place, the power, conflict and groupthink circumstances that gave rise to the Fantasy Theme of Bubba may never have occurred.

The XYZ Corporation has been sold since the Bubba fantasy theme took place. Ironically, the company that had formerly employed the Bubba system manager purchased XYZ Corporation. Needless to say, one of the first tasks at hand was to untangle the system that became known as Bubba as quickly as possible. Careers and lives were changed as individuals made tough decisions to move on to other employment situations that would hopefully harbor less frustration. Even though the recollection of details leading up to and surrounding the Bubba fantasy theme may differ from one individual to the next, long after the circumstances have occurred, to many past and present XYZ Corporation employees, the fantasy theme of Bubba lives on.

Through a spectrum of interviews with past and present staff members from different departments of XYZ Corporation, common perceptions, decisions and conflicts gave rise to the Bubba fantasy theme. Expert power and conflict had led to management groupthink, which led to key employees leaving the company out of frustration. As deadlines for implementing the new information system (and other projects) were missed, upper management who were being told what they wanted to hear now had to make adjustments for the loss of key employees. XYZ Corporation is making every effort today to resolve conflicts within the system that had become known as Bubba.
Chapter Three: Theme Analysis

3.01 A review of the study participants, backgrounds and the interview process

There were twenty (20) past and present XYZ Corporation staff members invited to be participants in this case study. Eleven (11) agreed to participate from this group. Five of these participants were middle managers, and six were staff members. Six of the twenty who were asked to participate declined. Of these, three were upper level managers and three were staff members. Three participation requests resulted in no response. Each of the participants that did not respond to the first request was sent a second copy of the invitation to participate before they were categorized as non-responders. Each private interview was tape recorded while the researcher took notes. Interviews lasted from one to one and one-half hours, and the researcher later transcribed the tapes for theme analysis and note comparisons.

The eleven participants interviewed represented individuals from various departments who were with the XYZ Corporation from the mid-1990s to the year 2000. During the time frame investigated by this case study, the participants ranged in age from their mid twenties to their mid 50's, while having been employed with the organization from three years to thirty years. Since the days of the new computer system's early development and implementation, and at the time of the study, the organization was under new ownership and management.

Participants in this postmortem case study research were members of the product engineering, manufacturing, quality assurance, manufacturing engineering and information technology groups. Each person had a unique perspective of the new business system's development, and voluntarily shared their stories. The research was
conducted by a participant observer, who had worked for the XYZ Corporation for 14 years before leaving the organization at the end of the year 2000, for another career opportunity. It was during graduate studies in the field of communication that the researcher began to understand that a symbolic convergence had taken place at the XYZ Corporation, while the organization was developing a new business computer system. Matters of organizational change were at the heart of getting the new system up and running. With further study, it became evident that the events, which took place during the change process, were thoroughly described in the writings of Ernest Bormann (1972, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1997), on symbolic convergence theory.

During this research, every effort was made to analyze the participants' stories from each of their perspectives. Through a time consuming and painstaking process of note taking, recording, transcribing, compiling and analyzing their stories, an emergent picture of a symbolic convergence materialized. Firsthand knowledge of the organization being studied, and a comparative analysis of the participant’s views helped identify the scenes, themes, and persona that emerged and played key roles during the development of a computer system that became simply known as Bubba. Answers to key questions in this study may help others avoid the negative aspects of similar situations.

3.02 The XYZ Corporation Scenes: The Cubicle Villages, Offices and Factories

Each of the departments and divisions of the XYZ Corporation set the stage for scenes surrounding the new system development. These ranged from separate corporate office buildings that stood apart from the manufacturing facilities, to sizable areas on the second floor of the main office building, to offices in bunkers scattered throughout the manufacturing plants. Most of the larger office areas could be described as cubicle
villages. Shoulder high, temporary partitions separated the employee workstations, so only a moderate amount of privacy was ever evident among those in cubicles. Office managers were located in rooms with closeable doors surrounding the perimeters of the cubicles. Manufacturing engineers and supervisors were located in block wall bunkers located in the factories. These structures provided moderate shelter from the noise and traffic found in the busy factories, but they were little more than industrial versions of the cubicle villages found in the other office areas.

The scenes and stages for the new system's development were much like that of any modern manufacturing facility of its kind. From what could be gathered about the evolution of Bubba during this study, it appears the system’s evolution was as much about the need for appropriate and more effective communication than the physical sites where it took place. Each department used a similar open environment layout, with cubicles intended to foster more open interaction and layout flexibility. As this study progressed it seemed somewhat ironic that a layout that was intended to encourage interaction might also have helped facilitate the spread of attitudes toward Bubba. It was not uncommon for people to make comments that could be easily heard among others in the immediate vicinity of any given cubicle. Conversations were often carried on "over the wall", without the participants ever seeing those who were taking part in the discussion.

In the factory it was a different story. The factory was a noisy environment, with the sounds and smells of wood and plastic machining that told all those present, that things were getting done. Orders were being built and delivery deadlines had to be met. If anything slowed progress here, everyone knew there would be trouble. People in this
environment had a different perspective on what Bubba needed to do for them, because here it was a matter of pulling all the correct parts and pieces together to get the order out. They needed just the facts, nothing more, nothing less. Getting the right parts and pieces to where they needed to be on time was of utmost importance. The correct location and identification of thousands of parts, both machined and purchased, had to be coordinated in order to keep the customers happy and everyone’s job intact.

The scenes surrounding Bubba’s initial development were an entirely different matter. It would be like comparing a sterile birthing room in a hospital to the activities found at a noisy construction site. Meeting after meeting took place behind closed doors. Some in the executive office building, some in offices around the perimeters of the cubicle villages and some in the larger conference rooms when they were available. As time went on, there was a sense that if those in the quiet meeting rooms had spent more time in the busy, noisy, factory to follow the realities of how the products were processed, things may have gone differently. The ever-changing environment of such large production facilities would have benefited from more open lines of communication and more direct links to the decision-makers.

Separate divisions of XYZ Corporation were also located in other parts of the United States. As part of on-going efforts to improve corporate efficiencies and profitability, there was talk of the new system being used by these other locations as well. This meant that even wider spheres of interaction would be necessary, and any unique circumstances that other facilities encountered would eventually need to be addressed with the new system.
Another interesting aspect of the “scenes” in the XYZ organization involved the length of time an employee had been with the organization. Though notions of “scene” involve specific times and places, an important aspect becomes where any given place is viewed in time, and by whom. This goes beyond the dates on a calendar and the time on a clock, and it helps establish a sense of reference as it relates to the here and now. Just as important is the sense of where the observer has been in the past, compared to their sense of where they may be headed. In this case study, at first it appeared that the age of different organization members might have been an issue, but through the interview process it became evident that an employee’s time with the company may have been a bigger factor than their age. In some respects the two are linked, since anyone that has been with an organization for three decades will generally, by default, be older than new recruits are. The amount of time that XYZ Corporation employees were with the organization came across as an issue because those with more experience had seen a larger number of owners and management groups come and go. Their sense of history, and what others had tried before had left different impressions of where the organization might be headed. These were often different impressions than those expressed by employees that were newer to the organization. Newer employees had less knowledge of the past. Their lists of issues were often similar to organization members with more years of service, but the explanations for their viewpoints were sometimes different. Younger organization members seemed to have less trouble with a “just do it” implementation message from upper management. Older, more experienced staff members appeared more comfortable when they felt they understood the logic behind what was being expected. What effect participant experience or age may have had on the emergence of
the symbolic convergence in this case study is unclear, but the issue may be a worthwhile consideration for future study.

3.03 Key Themes

The outdated business computer system known as MAMIS had to be replaced at XYZ Corporation. Through interviews conducted during this case study, few recalled what the acronym MAMIS actually stood for, but those that had been with the organization long enough and had used or remembered the old system knew it as an MRP (manufacturing resource planning) type program. Around the mid-1990s a rather extensive review of off-the-shelf systems got under way. The search involved representatives from several departments, and from three finalists, one software package was chosen as the best candidate. For purposes of anonymity, it will be referred to as a system by T. J. Johnson. On the subject of the MAMIS system needing to be replaced, one of managers present through the entire process stated, “It couldn’t do the things you’d want it to do nowadays. MAMIS was nothing more than an inventory control system, the planning tool.” The system chosen was by no means perfect, but it appeared that with customization, support and working closely with the software supplier it could be adapted to adequately meet the needs of the XYZ Corporation.

3.04 What’s in a name?

Among those that inhabited the cubicles in the organization, there was a common notion that the name Bubba was an unfortunate choice, even if it was intended as an expression of lighthearted humor. There was little consensus on whether the name was an acronym, with some special meaning for each letter in the word, or whether it was just something to call the new system until a “real” name was chosen as it grew nearer to
implementation. It was also unclear who first coined the term, but most seemed to think it was either the gentleman hired to develop the system in the first place, or one of the vice presidents in the organization. When participants were asked what impression the name Bubba left them with, the following comments were shared.

- "Here you are, trying to develop a sophisticated computer system, a one of a kind thing to do everything you want it to do, and you give it some stupid name."
- "They picked something that seemed like it was derogatory."
- "I think it became almost like a cuss word."
- "Bubba to me means some clumsy oaf. It’s a good ol’ boy type of nickname. I wouldn’t appreciate being called Bubba."
- "It’s a derogatory name with a little bit of a negative connotation rather than positive."
- "Bubba to me was a good ol’ boy, and good ol’ boy wasn’t so good."
- "Well, it wasn’t a flattering thing. What it meant to me was, it was a homemade system, you know, thrown together. It gave me all kinds of images because of that name."

Though the name appeared to be on shaky ground from the beginning, as time went on its image grew worse due to increasing levels of frustration, power struggles and an expressed need for more training. One of the study participants from the product-engineering group described their view of the power struggle in situations like this.

"I don’t think management ever really understood what was going on in the trenches of the organization, and little empires set up throughout the company. They had their product design empire, and they had their purchasing empire, and
you know, in each area they had their dictators; which not only had power within the organization, they had a lot of unofficial political power. So there was official power and there was unofficial power being used throughout the organization.”

This person also went on to say,

“...There was definitely a disconnect between the working managers and the executive group, and I think you got a different perspective from being on the staff than the executive end. I think there was a whole different type of communication. I think it was a slanted viewpoint. And of course, in saying that, I don’t think that’s terribly uncommon. I mean, you always want to put your best foot forward in front of the big boss, and so, ya know it’s not a terrible thing for a manager to do that; especially if he’s in a vulnerable position.”

These statements are very revealing in that there is not only an expression of frustration with the disconnect that was observed between staff “in the trenches” and management, but there is also an element of excusing the middle management behavior described. These managers were finding themselves between a rock and a hard place, so it was felt they had little choice but to go along with what they were being told to do. At the same time however, there was an impression that they would defend their “empire” over others in the organization that might pose a threat. On the same subject, another study participant from the manufacturing department stated,

“Yeah, and a lot of times upper management have their viewpoints that they’re promoting, and they’re not particularly interested in the realities of what’s going on at the lower levels.”
With these kinds of observations being shared, it did not appear that various departments shared a strong sense of oneness.

3.05 Frustration

Throughout this case study, the words "frustrated", "frustrating" and "frustration" come up again and again among the participants. Examples of this include the following comments from participants in the product engineering, quality assurance, manufacturing engineering, and manufacturing groups.

- "I was frustrated mostly with the fact that I was hired to do product development, and there was no product development being done because of the new system."
- "We knew there was not a single thing that any of us could do to change the direction that they were headed. So you know, it was kind of a frustration."
- "Do you know what was so frustrating for me? I always felt in that organization, things were a little off tilt, off center, not quite right. And I worked there for ten years, and my viewpoint never changed."
- "I know we had meetings, but I don’t recall exactly what their goal was, besides having a new system. Well, I’m assuming that eventually it was to help our jobs out, but from the start of it, it frustrated a lot of people."

The last comment is especially interesting because it also points out an observation that others made about the situation, saying meetings were often held with participants coming out with a sense of wonder as to what was just said or accomplished. Perhaps one of the more revealing interview exchanges regarding frustration as a "theme" was expressed when a manufacturing manager shared,
"There was a lot of frustration there because the team got together, the team reviewed this stuff and then, we all agreed that this was the way to go, and here we are, we're stuck with this piece of shit now. It was that kind of frustration from those people, and when I say those people, I can't say it was all of them. I can just say some of them weren't happy with it as things went along. They let you know that we should have gone the other way.

Interviewer: There was no turning back?

Participant: Yeah, and I think everybody realized that.”

These are powerful statements from a number of standpoints, especially when considering the situation from a symbolic convergence theory perspective. These statements offer evidence that the situation, which began with smaller groups within the organization, began to spread to larger groups. These groups were forming their own impressions of the situation, and the system known as Bubba was taking on a persona of its own, its own identity. A group consciousness had formed among those that were recruited to facilitate the system's initial evolution. Individual members of various groups, both new and old with the organization, expressed frustration with the way the system was introduced. One study participant who was in charge of helping coordinate the new systems' implementation shared the following:

“A lot of the focus got lost when they tried to do everything. Instead of looking at the initial focus, which was to build the front end, the configurator, bill of materials generator, things that go into the company; and when (the new system chief) finally had his okay, he wanted to write purchasing, he wanted to write inventory, manufacturing, and everything. They could have just as well focused
on what they really needed and wanted out of the system, and not tried to do the whole thing."

Interviewer: Were all of these things just too additive?

Participant: Well you didn’t have to buy it for one thing. The whole concept to start with was a good concept. It eliminated smart part numbers; the configurator would generate a bill of materials on the fly and all the good stuff that came with that. They got carried away with trying to do purchasing rather than just interface to a nice purchasing package, and interface to a nice inventory control package. They bit a lot off more than they could chew for the amount of time they had to put into it.”

Interviewer: What kind of a time crunch was there?

Participant: With the first system, they gave us a year to get it fully implemented. The second system (T.J. Johnson) started around the next year again, and they gave us about nine months to put together a product that wasn’t as good as the first one.

Interviewer: Okay, but why were the time frames shortening?

Participant: Because they felt that we had experience already doing it on a system, so we could just jump into this one and they forgot that it’s a whole different system. By the third one (Bubba) we were down to about six months, and that one we were writing on our own. So actually, it was reversed to the way it should be.”

The feeling that too much was trying to be accomplished in too little time was echoed time and again among the study participants. Participants used terms like “ego”, when
asked if they felt there were other contributing factors to the evolution of Bubba. Those in charge of the new system needed it to succeed on an aggressive timeline since they had to prove to those at the top that such a monumental task could be accomplished according to their plan. The problem was, plans kept changing and the resulting confusion led to a great deal of discomfort among the ranks.

Though everyone knew the new system was an inanimate object, it had taken on a life of its own. Examples of this were evident in the way the study participants talked about the system. When one manager was asked how he might have liked to see things done differently, his response was,

“I probably would have phased the damn thing in and tried that, rather than trying to do it all at one time and creating such a mess.”

References in the third person like, “the damn thing”, indicated Bubba was being viewed and referred to, as though there was some kind of disconnect between the system and those behind its development. As the new computer system was evolving, so too were the ways members of the XYZ Corporation were referring to it.

3.06 Three Sub-Themes

3.06a That’s a J.G.

In the later stages of the selection and development process the organization came under new management, and the process appeared to go back to square one. Ultimately, a new system chief for the project was brought on board and a major change of direction took place. For purposes of anonymity the new system chief will be referred as Jim Gant (J.G). It should be noted that the name here is only significant in that the use of his
initials evolved into a kind of sub-theme with regard to new features being continually added to the system. During the interview process, one of the study participants said,

"I think as far as implementation, the guy leading it was giving (top) management timelines that they wanted to hear, and were not realistic based on the resources he had to work with and the magnitude of the job. And it of course became a term in a lot of meetings when somebody quoted or gave an unattainable goal, they used the term, "That's a J.G."."

This was an example of a sub-theme with links to the Bubba system spinning off as an inside joke. Bubba was the creation of J.G. Gant, and when organization members felt questionable claims were being made about the availability and functionality of the system their only recourse was to express their frustration by denouncing such claims as a "J.G." This was of course never said in the presence of Mr. Gant, or to any of the top corporate executives that he may have made questionable claims to. It was strictly a way for certain organization members who felt they were victims of their situation to use humor to cope with the circumstances. It was interesting to note that in later stages of the new system development, some organization members openly used this term behind closed doors while speaking with the supervisors, and no reprisals were involved. This indicated that off the record there were middle managers agreeing with staff frustrations, but they were in no position to question the situation or do anything to change it.

3.06b That's the beauty of the system

The use of catch phrases and inside jokes were an indicator that a symbolic convergence had emerged as well. This was clearly demonstrated through the use of a phrase that came to have more than one meaning to different groups. The phrase in this
case was simply "That’s the beauty of the system." The case study participants were all familiar with the term, and most felt the creator of the new system, J.G. Gant, first used the phrase as a promotional message. When questions came up whether the system might be capable of providing additional information or configure new product combinations and offerings the response was "That’s the beauty of the system".

Since the system was being developed in house, those doing the programming could write the code to provide whatever information or product combinations management might desire. The notion of adding and changing features to meet the changing needs of the organization was very appealing. The realities however, of developing the system on the fly and also having to meet the needs of a live production environment created a good deal of conflict. An illustration of this came up as one of the study participants from the manufacturing area shared the following,

"Unfortunately, one of the things that got us caught, it was fragmented. By fragmented, what I’m talking about is you had a programmer doing something with some group over in one spot, and then some other programmer was working on something, and I just remember that’s where the term “hooks” come in.

Interviewer: Hooks?

Participant: Yeah. Where they hooked onto something to gather some information and some other programmer went in and changed something and that hook was no longer there. And all of a sudden, whatever you thought you had was no longer there.

Interviewer: So a change in one area would affect another without knowing it until after the fact?"
Participant: Right, right, yeah. Well, you didn’t until after the fact. You never knew, because everyone thought well, I ran this right, and it was working correctly, and then all of a sudden the other guy would make a change and “what the heck is this”? You ran into a lot of that. Or as, the portion of it I was involved in anyway, we ran into a lot of that and that’s one of the things that I seem to remember the most about it.”

This participant, who had to deal with the new system from the production perspective, had this to say,

“When they tried to run stuff, it was getting stuff all over the place. It came out…

Interviewer: The paperwork?

Participant: Paper, and they were saying “Oh my God!” At that point in time, it truly wasn’t even a joke. It was like sheer panic on these guys part.

Interviewer: They had to get product out?

Participant: YEAH! It was like, “Oh my God, how do I do this thing?” I remember I walked into that one bunker; somebody was showing me this stack. Doug, I swear to Christ that thing was over two-foot high! They said, “This thing won’t stop!” And they went out and bought those high-speed printers, remember? And it had tons of capacity. It used paper up the ying yang, and it just kept spitting it out, and spitting it out. There was stuff coming out with one or two lines on a page!”

The situation with “hooks” and a growing sense that users had little control or understanding of how the system was supposed to work contributed to a sub-theme for the phrase “That’s the beauty of the system”. In certain circles, the phrase began to be
used in a derogatory sense. When someone would lament another shortfall of the new
system, others would respond by saying, “That’s the beauty of the system,” causing
everyone within earshot to break out in laughter.

Staff engineers that were hired to do product development work were put on what
appeared to be a never-ending task of entering and maintaining part formulas. This was
going on while unknown, seldom seen, contract programmers were writing code that
gave nightmares to the production floor workers because of “hooks”. There was also a
major sense of disbelief when the engineering staff found out that the new system could
not handle simple if-then statements in formulas being entered to calculate part sizes.
How could a new, high-dollar system that was supposed to be state-of-the art not be
capable of the same calculation functions that modern spreadsheets could do with ease?
At that point, off-the-shelf spreadsheet programs costing a few hundred dollars appeared
to have more capacity and flexibility. This situation was further compounded by the fact
that the system had limitations on the number of characters that could be used in any
given formula length. This issue meant that a multitude of formula lines had to be
created and linked in order to perform calculation tasks that otherwise could have been
done more efficiently with far less costly software.

Inefficiencies of this kind led to a growing sense of wonder as to how the new
system might be any better than the old one that was being replaced. At least those that
were familiar with the old system’s limitations knew what to expect. The new system
appeared to be unpredictable and cumbersome, and once again it was leading those
working with it in the trenches to find ways to vent their frustrations. Anger toward the
system was of little use, especially since everyone knew there was no turning back.
Humor became the pressure vent of choice. When new shortfalls in the system would appear, those working on it would simply share the phrase, “That’s the beauty of the system.” This was generally followed by raucous laughter among group members, and grumbling about how this could be happening. One participant from the design-engineering group described the situation like this,

Interviewer: What comes to mind with the phrase, “That’s the beauty of the system”?

Participant: I think it was just a way that we knew that it wasn’t something that you could negotiate. We knew we were past the point of negotiation. You couldn’t say, “Hey, I think we should do it this way”. That wasn’t in the vocabulary, so we knew there was not a single thing that any of us could do to change the direction that they were headed. It was kind of a frustration. We would always just say “That’s the beauty of the system”, knowing that every time we came across something negative, you couldn’t bring it up because it was probably going to damage your career as being negative. And no matter what you said, it was always going to be construed as negative. Even if you thought to yourself, it was constructive; it was kind of out of frustration. We just offered that phrase to console ourselves. We gained a lot of humor, a lot of humor out of that phrase.

Interviewer: OK. Yeah, that’s what I was wondering, if you felt it was maybe just a way to relieve pressure and tension and share some chuckles?

Participant: Yep. It was a whole lot easier to do that than to really confront, or try to dig in and resolve something. Because you knew that it was kind of futile.
I think a lot of that had to do with the group of guys too, because I’ve attempted to use “That’s the beauty of the system” a couple times in other jobs, and it just didn’t catch. You know, I thought as catchy as it was at XYZ, but that same phrase outside of that condition wasn’t near as funny as it was at XYZ.

Interviewer: Kind of one of those, “you had to be there?”

Participant: Yeah, really, you sure did.

This demonstrates another situation where the frustration and conflict surrounding the development of Bubba manifested itself with a catch phrase. On one hand the phrase was being used to promote a notion that the new system could be made into whatever top management wanted it to be. On the other hand, it was being used to mock what were perceived to be short falls with the new system.

3.06c B.I.M.B.O.

Yet another example of humor being used to vent frustration was evident through a situation that occurred with a division of the XYZ Corporation located in an eastern state. The new system was not going to be available for use by this division for some time, so one of the engineers had to use a commercially available spreadsheet to get them through their system needs. After doing so, he announced that he planned to call the new stopgap system “B.I.M.B.O.”. The study participant and creator of this acronym said the term meant, “Bet It Makes Bubba Obsolete.” Participants that were closer to the development of the new system were very familiar with this bit of humor. Those who joined the organization after the spreadsheet was created, or were further away from the situation in the factory setting, were not familiar with BIMBO at all. Through the humor expressed by the term BIMBO, organization staff that otherwise might not have been
exposed to the Bubba situation at the eastern facility were getting a sense of the frustration through a new, one word acronym being used as a name for a planning tool.

The persona Bubba had gained was spinning off and spawning new inside jokes. In retrospect it is apparent that if you weren’t part of the core groups who were experiencing the conflicts, you probably would not catch the humor. Dual meanings for the same phrase had emerged, being used in a positive and negative manner by different groups. The “beauty of the system” phrase was promotional to those convincing management this was the direction to go, while it was used as sarcasm by those who were frustrated with trying to get it going.

3.07 Training

Several of the participants shared the belief that better communication and more training were needed for the organization to more effectively implement the new system. When it came to questions of whether there was adequate training provided to those being asked to work on the new system, one staff engineer shared the following:

Interviewer: Were there any issues do you believe, in terms of training?
Participant: Probably the hardest part of developing a system like that, that really nobody knew; you were developing it as it went, and so there was no training. There was no training manual and there was no, “you do this, this way”, it was well, figure out a way to make it work. Well, it works this way, “Okay, that’s the way we’re going to do it.”

Interviewer: Okay, so it was sort of self-training?
Participant: Self training, yeah. That was always everybody’s complaint about it when we were first getting started. Can you give me a manual and let me look at
on how I’m supposed to do it? Well, there is no manual. You’re creating the manual.

Interviewer: You’re writing your own rules?

Participant: You’re writing your own rules, BUT, don’t do this...(laughter).

Interviewer: Can you expound on that? Don’t do what?

Participant: Don’t create another MAMIS! That’s what a lot of people wanted him (the new system chief) to do since that’s what they were used to.

This explains why even those that were new to the task of trying to get the new system up and running felt they were moving blindly into unknown territory. The only comfort found among organization members trying to make sense of the situation was in the fact that everyone was in the same situation. Though other study participants had already expressed the view that power struggles existed within the organization, another issue concerning power existed. This involved matters of expert power.

3.08 Expert Power

From findings in this study, the executives that were above the new system chief were at the mercy of his expertise and his say-so on how the new system would work and when it would be functional. On this subject, one of the middle managers passed this information on:

Interviewer: Do you think there were any issues in terms of expert power? People that were the gurus, and knew what was going on, so don’t question them?

Participant: Oh sure, absolutely. We’re looking at a double-edged sword here. If you have 30 people that all think they’re right, you’re going to end up with nothing but confusion. So you have to have somebody that’s going to oversee it
and say, "No, this is how it’s going to be, and this is how it has to be.” But, was there a dictatorship that wasn’t willing to listen to a lot of other thoughts, and what might happen if this is happening? I’m sure there was. You know, there was a lot of people that had a lot of insight that would say, well, if we’re going to do this, this is going to happen. I’m sure they went to the top and said, this is going to happen, (and the response was) no, no, no, just implement it, this is the way we see it.

Interviewer: Just do it?

Participant: Just do it.

The following information was shared by one of the managers directly involved with the new system implementation.

Participant: I don’t know that anybody at the top really understood what we were really doing. And maybe that was partly our fault for not being better at communicating to some of the VPs. And maybe that’s because we bit off so much we didn’t know what we were doing until we got to it.

Interviewer: Was the new system chief perhaps not getting things across to those at the top?

Participant: As many meetings as I sat in with the new system chief, very rarely would he get up and elaborate on what he was doing or how it was going to work. He more or less just sat there and would shake his head, “Yeah, no problem.”

Interviewer: Were the others even familiar enough with what questions to ask in terms of, okay, what support do you need? On one hand there are issues where
you need to be able to get a point across, telling people, “Here’s what we need and why” and then you get on with life.

**Participant:** They left it pretty much up to the new system chief. They entrusted him with getting it done, with whatever their understanding of it was.

**Interviewer:** Do you think he had enough support in terms of whatever he needed?

**Participant:** They gave him whatever he wanted.

The implications of this information from an expert power standpoint are strong indeed. It must again be kept in mind that this study is in no way intended to be an indictment of individuals, but one of process. Had more definitive direction been provided by top managers, and more effective, clear communication been insisted upon from lower levels, there may have been a better understanding of what the new system was supposed to accomplish and in what time frame.

### 3.09 What could be done?

The new system implementation was slowly being recognized as a potential problem by upper management and this led them to take action that many felt was a desperate attempt to stop the spread of negative inferences. The XYZ Corporation released a periodic newsletter to its employees. This house organ was used as a means to get word out to the rank and file on company activities and progress. One of the coordinators for the newsletter agreed to be a participant for this study, and verified that this situation occurred. Though no surviving copies of the newsletter referencing the naming contest for the new computer system, the situation was retold by several of the study participants, and this represents an interesting and important phase in the evolution
of the Bubba symbolic convergence. As the system grew closer to being used in production, it needed a new name for public use. The newsletter was used to promote a company-wide contest to come up with a system name. While promotion of the naming contest was going on, departmental meetings were held and memos were sent out declaring that the term “Bubba” was no longer to be used. On this subject, the participant involved with production of the newsletter shared the following information on how the newsletter was used.

**Participant:** He (the new system chief) was supplying information in article form and it was typed up and put into the newsletter.

**Interviewer:** Were there ever times through those transactions, when others looked at it, scratched their heads and said, how real is this?

**Participant:** Yeah, I think more often than not. I would say that the factory personnel, where those letters were going out to, had the most skeptics. They were skeptical of the truth. I would sit in on meetings with the teams and they would basically tell you how awful things were. They’d ask, “Can’t you do something about it?” Then you’d come back and you’d talk to someone about it and it was like you were just running in circles.

**Interviewer:** Okay that segues into one of the questions that deals with how you feel others felt about Bubba, and why did they feel that way?

**Participant:** Wasn’t good, um, inadequate. People were told this was really going to be the answer and it turned out to be anything but.

The name chosen after the company-wide naming contest took place, was “Sharp Tack” (pseudonym). There seemed to be little reaction one way or another regarding the new
name. The bigger issue concerning the system name appeared to be the reaction from staff being told that henceforth the name Bubba was no longer to be used. This brought to mind a scene from the epic 1956, Cecil B. DeMille film, “The Ten Commandments”, when the Pharaoh of Egypt declared that the name of Moses was to be stricken from every obelisk and never spoken again. Any attempt to suppress the name of someone, (or in this case something) that had been promoted as an icon representing a path to a better future was doomed to fail. Simply changing the new system name and forbidding the use of the word Bubba was not going to change anyone’s view on the matter. Bubba had taken on an identity of its own and no decree to stop the use of the name was going to change perceptions or how it was viewed by those involved with the way it was being developed.

An appropriate name for the new computer system was certainly necessary for company use in the public sector. On this basis, declaring that the name Bubba should not to be used made perfect sense. Though the need for a new name may have seemed obvious, it also made a case for the importance of assigning an appropriate name to things of importance in the first place. Initially calling the new system by a name that already appeared to carry a negative load was one thing, but telling organization members that the new system was not to be called Bubba any longer seemed a futile gesture. It only served to bolster the name’s use as an inside joke. Or as one study participant put it, “I think it became almost like a cuss word”.

Even though everyone knew the new computer system was an inanimate object, it had come to represent shared feelings of frustration, helplessness, and conflict. For many, most light-hearted notions of humor through the name Bubba had turned dark.
There was no turning back and no end in sight for the on-going development and maintenance demands for the system that was never to be called Bubba again.

In at least one department within the organization, the situation led to a snowballing exodus of staff members. The engineering group that was assigned the duty of entering a seemingly endless number of calculations into the new system began to suffer personnel losses. With the resignation of each staff member, those that remained were left with the burden of what still had to be done. One participant described the situation like this,

"I think they had professionals working full-time on the system and it was not their choice of career. For instance, design engineers would spend three or four years helping implement the system, while their choice of career, in some cases for decades, had been to design and implement new, innovative products. But instead, they were punching in formulas. A very mundane type of work, compared to what they really liked to do. That particularly stands out to me because I knew of at least a couple of very talented people that left for that reason, and that reason alone."

This is a very revealing statement when it comes to levels of frustration and anxiety the new system was causing. The design-engineering department experienced the resignation of five staff members over a six-month period. Along with the exodus of employees, went years of product knowledge and history within the company. In some cases, the employees that chose to leave had decades of experience with the organization and there was no good way for those remaining to replace the lost knowledge. Given more time and resources, this situation alone would have made an interesting study based on turning
points. Due to the sensitive and life changing nature of such situations, it raises a number of issues that even under sworn confidentiality, many preferred not to discuss.

3.10 The pitfalls of trying to be all things to all people

The new system was being created in house to avoid the inconvenience of buying an incomplete system from an outside vendor. There should be very few situations where the organization could not have the new system do anything it felt was necessary, since it was all being custom tailored. According to the study participants, problems arose when no apparent attempts were made to separate the nice-to-haves, from the need-to-haves.

One of the study participants shared this regarding the early development of Bubba:

Participant: At the beginning, there were all these (product) options put in, trying to cover every single base. After a few years there were thousands of options that were just created as a what-if.

Interviewer: They were created as a what-if? Thousands of options were put into the system as a what-if and they were never used?

Participant: Right.

This illustrates how the nice-to-have wish list of the order entry group had overshadowed the need-to-have reality of the organization’s typical product offerings. The fact that the new system could be configured to generate nearly any combination of product features had placed an extra burden on what was necessary to deal with the initial creation and future maintenance of Bubba. Notions that the new system’s ability to configure countless new product combinations caused concern among those responsible for manufacturing the products in an on-time and efficient manner. With no information or forecasts available on how new product offerings might affect production capacity, some
members of the manufacturing group were as apprehensive about Bubba as those who were charged with getting the new system up and running.

Another insightful comment from a department manager with over nineteen years of experience with the XYZ Corporation was this:

“The biggest thing that hurt (system development), was the lack of recognition that we were not trying to implement a system, but that we were trying to develop the system. Big difference; and I don’t think anybody at the top ever recognized that.”

This indicated again that there may have been a disconnect between notions of installing, learning and using a new computer system, and the realities of experts trying to create and direct the implementation of a new system in a live business environment. An analogy might be that of a master chef being required to bake numerous cakes in an oven as quickly as possible, while still trying to perfect the recipe and adding ingredients.

This situation also speaks to matters of concern from a public relations perspective. The organization’s internal publics included all of the departments and divisions involved with getting the new system up and running, and those that would be using it on a day-to-day basis. The external publics were customers and vendors that would also reap benefits from the new system’s capabilities. It is not clear from this study what the customers of XYZ Corporation might have been told regarding what the new system would have to offer and when. Study participants indicated new features and possible product combinations were being added on a regular basis as the program was being written. If the organization’s internal publics were not aware of where the system was headed or what final features it would have, how could their external publics know?
If internal publics were finding themselves without a unifying message, so too must have the organization’s external publics. The lack of effective communication directed toward these groups, leads to concern regarding the absence of a unifying vision.

3.11 The missing rhetorical vision

One of the study subjects who was relatively new to the organization during the development of the new system shared these revealing and insightful thoughts:

Interviewer: “Do you think they (management) had a vision so to speak, of what the system would be able to do, and how soon?”

Participant: “I think they all had a vision, but I don’t know what it was. From the start I never knew what anyone’s idea of what the system was supposed to do. There should have been more communication to keep everybody motivated. A little bit of a progress report probably would have helped. I could see one of the biggest things is how people see things differently. Some see things one way, and others another way, and they’re both looking at it from different departments, so they’re trying to push their best way to help their use of the system. Yet, if they ease their side, it makes the other sides more difficult.”

If employees working on the new system at XYZ Corporation, “never knew what anyone’s idea of what the system was supposed to do”, it becomes clear why frustrations grew. This gentleman felt everyone must have had a vision, but they may have been in opposition to those of others in different departments.

This symbolic convergence case study may be in unique opposition to other studies, because the Bubba persona was assigned to a computer system whose convergence themes were founded on the lack of a strong rhetorical vision, not on the
basis of a strong one being present. In a number of past studies involving symbolic convergence, themes and persona emerge around public figureheads or celebrities. These figureheads often use rhetorical vision to explain where a group has been in the past, how they relate to the present, and where they are headed in the future. Under these circumstances and without a strong rhetorical vision being expressed from top management, organization members at XYZ Corporation were left with little but the impression they were on their own to figure out how to deal with the new system called Bubba.

When one of the middle management participants was asked what effect they felt the regular changes in the ownership and top management had on the new system development, this exchange took place:

**Interviewer:** Were the people at the very top, let's say the ultimate powers so to speak, familiar enough did you feel, with what was needing to be done or by whom? If the guy in charge of the new system was the only one that really knew what he had in mind, were the people that were above him, in your estimation, well enough informed?

**Participant:** During that particular time period, in fact the entire 90s, top management was changing like clockwork. So, no.

**Interviewer:** So, the revolving door perhaps, of the people at the very top, couldn't have really stayed on top of what had been done or where they were headed?

**Participant:** Absolutely not.
Interviewer: In that light, would more stable, less change at the top, do you feel, have made a difference in how effectively or how quickly even, something like this might have been implemented?

Participant: I would have to say I believe so. That it would have made a difference, if there was stability at the top. And the logic behind what I'm saying, what I feel would have happened there is, during that time period nobody was there really long enough to get a grasp of the entire organization, and what it needs, and where it was going, and where it had been.

Interviewer: And was that in any one particular department, or was that in several departments?

Participant: I'm talking about top management, and when I'm talking top management, I'm talking you know, basically the V.P.s (Vice Presidents).

Interviewer: Do you feel there was agreement among the V.P.s on which direction to go, or did it become more of yes men situation, where, okay whatever he says, that's what we'll do; regardless of their opinion on the subject.

Participant: Yes, yes. And I would believe that that's the mentality that would have been there, just because of the scope, the size of that. You know, for somebody to go in and just to make a comment and say, no this isn't working, we're going to change it, I don't know who would have had the authority, or the gall to do that.

Due to frequent changes in ownership and top management, organization leaders appeared to be missing a clear understanding of where the XYZ Corporation had been in relation to where it was at the moment, or where it was supposed to be heading. Study
participant accounts show evidence of struggles between various departmental "empires". A lack of understanding and direction on the part of employees working on the new system helped add to their frustration.

On the subject of there being a sense of vision from the top, one participant shared these views:

Interviewer: If the people at the top didn’t make it clear that, “Here’s the goal”, and if that vision wasn’t clear from the top, did everyone end up doing their own thing and try to make the best sense out of it they could?

Participant: You not only have to have that vision, you have to have that involvement from the top. That isn’t the case with a lot of these issues. You were there, and I think most of the people wanted it to succeed. They wanted it to be better than it was. They knew they needed something better. Most people I think bought into it (the new system), into what it would do, how it would work, and thought it was great. They bought into that part, but the whole, “how do we get there” was gone. And that’s where we got fragmented. Everybody was trying but nobody put it together.

With a sense that everyone was trying to do their best but no one was “putting it together”, it may be little wonder why a group consciousness formed, and various themes based on Bubba emerged. The evidence to support the fact that a symbolic convergence occurred rests in the same kinds of stories being told by members of different XYZ Corporation departments.
Chapter Four: Summary

In the introduction of this work it was stated that answers to two fundamental questions were sought through this study. Answers to these questions were intended to shed light on what things are helpful and what things are not, during times of major organizational change, through advancing the utility of Symbolic convergence theory. This theory allows for the analysis of situations that unfold in the form of a drama through their scenes, characters, plot lines, heroes and villains. Through the chain of events that occurred within the XYZ Corporation, a kind of group consciousness formed among group members. This group consciousness moved from small groups to larger groups and back to smaller groups again, going through a life cycle akin to a birth, growth, and death cycle.

Signs that these events evolved as a symbolic convergence include the use of inside jokes, and the use of expressions within groups that indicate “you had to be there”, in order to have an understanding of what the participants were going through. Insiders witnessed the way communication was spreading about Bubba through the significance of catch phrases. A symbolic convergence emerged and the persona of Bubba evolved, to take on a life of its own. Single words and phrases took on special meanings among various groups. From group to group these same expressions evolved to mean very different things.

When situations such as these are carefully broken down and studied after the fact, the themes and meanings that emerge can be a powerful tool when used to better understand what might have caused the circumstances to unfold as they did in the first place. As any drama unfolds a clearer picture comes to light. A quest for better
understanding became the basis for studying the themes that emerged during the introduction of the new computer system known as Bubba.

It was several years after the saga of Bubba had taken place, during graduate studies in the field of communication that this case study researcher realized a symbolic convergence had taken place at the XYZ Corporation. All of the puzzle pieces appeared to fit with the scholarly descriptions of how a symbolic convergence evolves and what the telltale characteristics of a convergence are. These characteristics could be identified through an analysis of themes and a study of the ways communication had changed and spread among groups through a chaining of events over time.

Without having gained an understanding of what had happened through advanced studies in communication, and having been there and witnessing the situation at the XYZ Corporation, it would have been impossible to put all of these puzzle pieces together. With 14 years of experience in the organization, and having seen first-hand the changes that took place from one owner and management group to the next, it began to come to light that something extraordinary had taken place during the development of the computer system called Bubba. These circumstances and their results were all part of an unfolding process. This process resulted in the emergence of a situation that no one could have predicted. Looking back to analyze the circumstances through the utility of symbolic convergence theory, a clearer understanding of what happened has emerged.

4.01 Theme Synthesis

In preparation for doing this research it became evident that by using symbolic convergence theory the situation at the XYZ Corporation could be analyzed through a dramatic format of scenes, characters and what lessons might be learned from the way the
story unfolded. The fact that these circumstances represent a real-world series of events strengthens the usefulness of what has been learned. The perspective each participant shared helped pull a bigger picture together. During the course of this study, inhabitants of the cubical villages expressed their views, along with a number of managers who had offices with closeable doors surrounding the cubicles. Other perspectives were shared by participants who had worked on the shop floor, and by managers whose job it was to try and combine the function of the new business computer system with the demands of building and shipping products in an on time and complete manner.

The old business computer system known as MAMIS had become obsolete. Though many in the organization seemed to have little first hand knowledge of why MAMIS needed to be replaced, there was an acceptance of a notion that new and better technology would help lead the organization into the new millennium. The new system would be a savior, and those that were brought in to create the new system would be among the heroes that helped the XYZ Corporation remain a viable and formidable competitor in the window and door industry.

An acceptance of the need for change was less an issue than was an understanding of direction and process. To many, the name Bubba seemed an odd choice of names for a corporate savior, but to most the name alone had less negative bearing on the situation than did the frustrations that grew from what was perceived by participants to be inadequate communication. Throughout this study, participants claimed that the system could have been called any other name, and their feelings and attitudes toward it would have ultimately been the same. The problems were rooted more in process than in nomenclature.
The first question posed at the beginning of this study was:

**Q1: What were perceptions and attitudes toward Bubba regarding the implementation of a new business computer system, and why?**

Perceptions and attitudes among members of the XYZ Corporation ranged from some basic understandings that a new system needed to be implemented, to in-depth knowledge of how Bubba's history had unfolded within the organization. Though calling the system Bubba at first was little more than a curiosity, it evolved into a single word that to this day brings a flood of emotions, memories and feelings toward the new system and its checkered history. Among the study participants, Bubba was a name that brought terms to mind like "good ol' boy", and "clumsy oaf". It grew into notions of "cobbled together" and not being well understood or thought out. These notions grew stronger as time went on and frustration increased among those who were trying to understand what those assigned with high levels of expert power were trying to accomplish.

As the system evolved the name Bubba had come to mean more than a funny way to identify the new system. In the words of one study participant Bubba became "a cuss word". The system not only took on an identity and life of its own, it began to represent a kind of management style. This situation revealed itself through the emergence of inside jokes, and humorous vents of frustration that were expressed through derogatory remarks. New catch phrases were being created and used by those who were enlisted to get the new system up and running. Phrases like "That's a J. G." were used among members of the cubicle villages when time-lines for Bubba's development and implementation were believed to be unrealistic.
More evidence of the way communication patterns had changed came to light when opposing meanings evolved for the once promotional phrase “That’s the beauty of the system”. This also proved to be a classic example of why a person “had to be there” to understand the irony and humor born of growing frustration. While the heroes brought into the organization were promoting the new system as a savior, something that could be all things to all people, the system’s reputation had slowly turned toward that of a villain.

Another unique aspect of the way certain terms were used among small groups and spread to larger groups, manifest itself with the notion that a commercially available spreadsheet, called BIMBO by its creator, might be preferred over the new system known as Bubba. The creator of the spreadsheet announced to others in the engineering groups and some of the east coast organization members that had to use the spreadsheet, that the name BIMBO was intended to mean, “Bet It Makes Bubba Obsolete”. Aside from raising a person’s level of curiosity, what would such a term mean to anyone not directly involved? Without an understanding of what Bubba had come to represent to members of the organization that were working closely with it, the only sense of what a BIMBO was, compared to a Bubba, would be left to a literal interpretation.

According to The American Heritage College dictionary (Pickett, 2002), the word bimbo is defined as,

*Slang, A woman who is vacuous or as having an exaggerated interest in her sexual appeal; A vacuous person* (p. 142).
The definition for *vacuous* is listed as,

Devoid of matter; empty, Lacking intelligence; stupid, Devoid of substance or meaning; inane, Devoid of expression; vacant, Lacking serious purpose or occupation; idle (p. 1512).

The noun *bubba* is defined as,

*Slang, Chiefly Southern US* Brother, A white working-class man of the southern United States, stereotypically regarded as uneducated and gregarious with his peers. (Alteration of BUB) (p. 186).

Given these literal definitions, an outsider to the development of Bubba at the XYZ Corporation might find it hard to understand how a bimbo might be preferable to a bubba, much less how a bimbo might make a bubba obsolete. Even to an outsider however, the sarcasm would not be lost in a comparison of the two terms. Who would not find disrespect in betting that a bimbo, being defined as an over-sexed, stupid person who is “lacking serious purpose or occupation” would somehow make an “uneducated” and “gregarious” Bubba obsolete? With little more than an understanding of these literal definitions, even outsiders would sense that whoever or whatever Bubba was, it was deemed as an inferior persona by those close to it.

Any sense that Bubba may have at one time been considered an organizational savior had certainly evaporated and hit an all time low with the advent of BIMBO. This was especially true if notions of a bimbo were being accepted as a superior replacement for Bubba. The tongue in cheek implication that a bimbo was preferable to a bubba spoke volumes about the feelings and attitudes that had evolved over time within the organization. It was at about this same time that upper management at the XYZ
Corporation decided a more professional name was needed to identify the new system. Whether the timing of this change was a coincidence or the result of some realization that the name Bubba had gained a negative persona of its own is unclear.

It became clear through this study, that no matter what the system would be called in place of the term Bubba; its reputation had already preceded it. A proper name was certainly needed for day-to-day business use, but to those who knew the history of the system’s evolution the term Bubba would always hold unique meaning. When attempts were made to end the use of the term Bubba through meetings, memos and company newsletter notices of a new name, it only served to ingrain a deeper sense that a savior and the heroes that supported it had become villains. Everyone had an important stake in the new system’s success. This meant there was a sense that the participants were also to some degree responsible for the way the new system had evolved.

It is important and interesting to note here that the term BIMBO was used as an affront toward the new system (a.k.a. Bubba) and not an attack directed toward any real persons. A vote of no confidence had been cast and was spreading against a computer system, a non-human entity, without any formal election ever taking place. By making a joke of the situation a sense of futility was being expressed and a bond was being forged among those sharing the same frustrations and feelings. In the back of participants minds they knew the system was simply an extension of those who were creating it. Everyone knew the new system would be an important part of the future well-being of the organization. Failure was not an option. If the new system failed it would have a negative impact on everyone and to some degree, reflect on everyone involved, not just
those at the top. At the same time there was a sense that not only the rank and file organization members were powerless, but the middle managers were as well.

Based on the information gathered from the research participants, notions of middle managers going along with upper management as yes men were replaced with a sense of their being stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place. If anything, those in the upper most management positions within the organization were seen as going along with the “all things to all people” ideas being sold by the new system chief. Even middle managers were hearing the phrase “That’s a J.G.” from their subordinates, who were using the term within their various departments without fear of reprisal. There were even indications from study participants that some of the executive managers who were ultimately above the new system chief were aware that the “J.G.” phrase was being used in departmental staff meetings. Under these circumstances, expert power was holding sway over those in top management positions. The notion of groupthink or yes men being involved may have been more in play from the top down, toward the new system chief, rather than from the bottom up.

This meant executive managers were at the mercy of the advice and expertise of the new system chief and had little choice but to agree with technologies they had little knowledge of. Without the new system chief having a clear understanding of what top management wanted the new system to do for the organization, and a clear plan and vision being expressed by executive managers as to how those goals were to be accomplished, the evolution of Bubba becomes more understandable. Impressions of an ever-changing set of goals and implementation dates allowed frustrations to grow, while
a sense of helplessness to change what was going on grew among departmental managers as well. The process was allowing the system to become its own worst enemy.

Though this term never emerged during the evolution of this symbolic convergence, comparing the persona that evolved for Bubba with that of a Frankenstein can be used as a useful analogy. Turning once again to the dictionary (Pickett, 2002), a Frankenstein is defined as,

An agency or creation that slips from the control of and ultimately destroys its creator

(p. 551).

To some degree, everyone involved with the development of Bubba felt a sense of ownership in the system. If the system faltered it meant those working on it faltered as well, and no one likes to feel their best efforts were somehow not measuring up. Without the experts hired by XYZ Corporation clearly identifying how the Bubba system was supposed to function there was a sense that it could easily become a creation that "ultimately destroys its creator". Had Bubba become the organization's Frankenstein?

The people from the cubicle villages had a growing sense that Bubba had grown beyond their control. Much like the fictional character of Dr. Frankenstein losing control of his creation, the experts in charge of Bubba were not conveying a strong sense among the rank and file that they knew how to handle the monster that Bubba was evolving into. Rather than light torches and chase down some hideous monster, organization members felt forced to turn to the only defenses they had against Bubba. In a sense some hid, some ran away and others were simply left to face the unknown with fear and frustration.
Their perceptions of the situation and the ways they communicated fed a growing sense of animosity toward a system they had little control over.

During the development of the new system there was a good deal of confusion among organization members regarding exactly what the new system was supposed to be able to do and when. It wasn’t intended to be a duplicate of the old MAMIS system, and the notion that it could be all things to all people seemed to have little basis in reality or support among those who were being directed to make the system functional. No apparent rhetorical vision was guiding the organization with regard to the new system, and had there been a strong, consistent message it might have spawned a very different kind of group consciousness. There was a fading sense that those in charge of the organization were in control of Bubba.

This postmortem case study research was done to help shed light on how organizational changes might be more effectively implemented when new technologies are introduced. It is in no way intended to be an indictment of individuals or groups, but an aid to future process planners who might find themselves in similar circumstances. New technologies, programs, and equipment are introduced into organizational settings every day. The lessons learned from this case study might be applied in any number of other situations where confusion, frustration or a general resistance to organizational change might manifest itself.

There is no way to reproduce the circumstances studied in the XYZ Corporation case study, just as there is no possibility of taking back what happened. The conclusions and proposals for changes presented here are based on a careful analysis of the real world circumstances surrounding the saga of Bubba. The benefit of hindsight and reflection
from both the participants' observations and the researcher's analysis have led to a
determination of possible improvements in the way Bubba evolved.

Though a symbolic convergence involves the evolution and spread of a "shared
group consciousness" (Bormann, 1985) what was taking place was not evident to those
involved at the time. Views shared by the study participants indicated the new system
evolved as much on its own as it did according to anyone's master plan. Through this
research and hindsight, it became clear that a group consciousness indeed formed during
the evolution of Bubba, and the way organization members were communicating changed
as a result of the situation. With this evidence in mind, conclusions and possible
solutions can be outlined to answer the second question posed in this case study.

Q2: As a means to support the need for organizational change, how might Bubba
have evolved differently?

4.02 Analysis

The conclusions drawn during the course of this thesis are based on the
interconnected communication patterns and recurrent themes that unfolded during
participant interviews and their comparative analysis. Analyzed from a symbolic
convergence theory perspective, each of the themes identified had unfolded through the
scenes of XYZ Corporation's cubicle villages, the offices and the organization's
factories. The themes that emerged focused on matters of frustration and confusion.

A persona emerged during the evolution of the computer system called Bubba,
and the way organization members felt about the system had a great deal to do with the
way Bubba was developed. Even though the system was an inanimate object, it
represented what the study participants saw as a flawed process. Bubba represented an
entity that was given support from the highest executives in the organization, without effectively sharing a master plan with their internal and external publics. If those working on the system had doubts about the system, how could they spread confidence on to those that were expecting great things from the replacement of MAMIS?

There were seven (7) basic themes that emerged during this study, and they all had their foundation in the creation and evolution of Bubba. The seven themes were based on the frustrations that the new business computer system called Bubba came to represent. The new system was developed while production orders had to be met. This caused anxiety among those responsible for providing the best possible products and services for the XYZ Corporation's customers. A persona emerged based on what the name Bubba came to mean to those responsible for the new computer system implementation. A lack of training and the redistribution of staff duties, with little sense of direction from top executives, only served to increase levels of animosity toward the system that was supposed to be a savior for the company. Expert power that was assigned to the new system chief by top executives made middle managers and the organization's support staff feel powerless to question how and when the new system would or should become operational.

Organization members' impressions of the way the new system was being developed only grew worse when top management announced that the name Bubba was never to be used again. The new system was to be called Sharp Tack going forward, as though this would cure any ill impressions the system had already acquired.

As impressions grew that the system was promoted as being all things to all people and without evidence of a master plan to reassure organization members of where
they had been, where they were at, and where they were headed; their confidence dwindled.

The seventh, and perhaps most important theme identified in this research was the participants impression of *a missing rhetorical vision*. Each study participant indicated there was little indication that there was a master plan, or if there was, it was not shared with organization members at large. There was a sense that Bubba had become a good thing gone badly, or at the very least it was beyond the understanding and control of those that would be its master.

A combination of all these circumstances led to the emergence of at least *three sub themes* in the Bubba saga. One sub theme involved the use of the term "That's a J.G.", when organization members felt unrealistic timelines or system capabilities were being promoted by those with expert power. A second sub theme was based on the use of the phrase "That's the beauty of the system". Originally this was used by the new system chief to promote the new system in the sense that it could be made to be all things to all people. Those dealing with some of the day to day realities of what Bubba was and was not capable of, used "That's the beauty of the system" as an inside joke to share their frustration toward the new system's shortcomings. The third sub theme emerged with the advent of the acronym *BIMBO*. This stopgap spreadsheet was created to do what Bubba could not, at an East Coast facility that was supposed to eventually use Bubba.

4.03 Conclusions

Based on these seven main themes and three sub themes, there are three (3) main conclusions drawn from this study based on theme analysis, and two (2) suggestions that
emerged as possible approaches to reduce the levels of the frustration that participants felt during Bubba's development.

The first conclusion stresses the importance of top organization leaders expressing a strong rhetorical vision. There was little sense among participants that organization leaders had expressed a strong rhetorical vision, as the new computer system was being developed and implemented. A clear and repeated expression of such a vision would have helped get, and keep, everyone on board toward achieving the same common goals.

The path any organization needs to follow to achieve their goals needs to be widely understood and reinforced on a regular basis. This information needs to be clearly communicated at all levels, and to each of the key internal and external publics that will be affected by the use of any new technology. At the same time it must be understood that the notion of customer includes anyone that has a stake in the use or benefit of a new technology. Though this case study involved the development of a new business computer system, it might also represent the introduction of any new technology in an organizational setting. Again and again study participants indicated their frustrations would have remained the same regardless of what the system was called. The problems they perceived were based more in process than product.

The second lesson learned from the study of this symbolic convergence would be the importance of avoiding mixed signals and the use of open communication channels throughout the organization. When fears of reprisal are fed by perceptions that a new technology is being driven down the throats of those required to use it, a strong sense of frustration can be the result. When those in charge decide it has become necessary to make changes in a plan or direction, everyone involved needs to understand what those
changes are, and what effect they may have. It is important that communication channels remain open among key groups for an organization to remain responsive to their customer's needs, whether their customers are internal, external, or both.

A group consciousness had evolved as the new system was being developed, and though the term Bubba was being recognized in a number of similarly negative ways, the participants felt the system could have been called anything, and their impressions would have remained the same. Changing the system name from Bubba to Sharp Tack only rubbed salt in the unseen wounds created by the situation. By declaring that the name Bubba was no longer to be used, frustration from the top was made evident as well. Bubba had taken on an identity of its own and no one knew how to deal with it. The savior's name was banished from the organization, and along with this, confidence in the heroes that supported Bubba had eroded.

The need for a professional sounding name for the new system was never in dispute. At the same time however, XYZ Corporation staff knew that changing the name would have little to do with making the situation better. It would take more than a name change to counteract the feelings, attitudes and emotions that came to mind when the term Bubba (a.k.a. Sharp Tack) was used. Everyone knew that Sharp Tack was just an alias. Nothing had changed in the way the system was being developed or viewed.

Finally, the third conclusion drawn from this case study indicates the importance of listening to the input and concerns of organization members during times of change and new technology implementation. A sense of "just do it" was expressed again and again by the study participants. Organization members had gained little sense that their concerns and feedback were important when it came to the way Bubba was being
developed. Members of the cubicle villages and their managers expressed the same feelings. Experts had been hired by the executives at the top and were given mixed signals as to what the new system should be capable of doing and by when. On one hand, these experts wanted to please their superiors and sell the notion that Bubba could be fashioned to be all things to all people. Top executives may have liked this general notion, but the realities of development, implementation, timing, and resource allocation all played a role in raising levels of confusion and frustration throughout the organization. Those that were enlisted to make the new system operational often felt their input was not regarded as important or worthy of discussion. Staff members and middle managers alike felt they had no control over the faceless entity called Bubba. If there was any way things could have been changed to improve the situation, it was not evident at the time.

In retrospect, the realization that a symbolic convergence had taken place has led to the identification of key themes and the causes for what took place. Had there been a strong rhetorical vision in place, and clearly expressed goals much of the Bubba story would have been different. The avoidance of mixed signals and the use of more open, effective communication directed toward all of the organization's key publics would have gone a long way to tip the scales in Bubba's favor. Finally, the importance of listening to the input, concerns and suggestions of experienced staff members cannot be overstated. If any team as a group does not understand the object of the game they are playing, and they also begin to lose confidence in their coaching staff's ability to lead them to victory there is little hope for success. Such was the case with Bubba (a.k.a. Sharp Tack) at XYZ Corporation at the dawn of the new millennium.
4.04 Possible Solutions

In addition to the three main conclusions derived from this study, there were two interesting suggestions made as possible solutions to reduce the frustrations felt by members of the engineering groups. The first suggestion involved the hiring of specific, full-time support staff for data entry. One study participant shared an experience he had with an employer he had hired on with since leaving the XYZ Corporation. His new organization had enormous amounts of data entry work that needed to be done. It became apparent that the organization's needs could be accomplished with staff members that were far less costly than trained engineers.

This suggestion helped bring to light why middle managers in the design and manufacturing groups at the XYZ Corporation may have felt helpless when it came to their staff member's duties being reallocated. In fact, the data entry that was required of the XYZ engineers was in addition to their normal product engineering projects, with little apparent consideration for the extension of deadlines to complete either set of tasks. Data had to be entered into Bubba, and it had to be duplicated numerous times to account for the expansion of odd product line offerings. This process involved an inefficient series of file copy procedures. When engineering professionals were assigned to these seemingly endless data entry tasks, their spirits were slowly being crushed. Unfortunately, their managers had no power to change the situation and could do little but watch the morale of their staff spiral into decline. As time went on the data entry situation became more daunting. One by one, several engineering staff members decided to leave the organization rather than live with a situation that they felt showed little promise of change.
The second suggestion made by another study participant involved the use of Co-op students to help enter data at the startup of similar projects. This option may have had merit as well, but no lines of communication appeared to exist in the XYZ organization that would have allowed for either of these possible solutions to be explored. More open lines of communication would have had to be supported from the top executives, and they appeared to be relying on what they were being told could be done by those they had assigned expert power.

Though there has been a vast amount of study and literature written on the subject of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis, this researcher is not aware of other symbolic convergence models of this particular type being available for review. And though it would seem similar cases must surely exist, there does not appear to be specific reference to research in the literature involving the implementation of new business computer systems being analyzed through symbolic convergence theory.

New technology implementations are a matter of every day life in today’s business and organizational landscape. Because of this, there would appear to be endless opportunity for other studies to be done for comparison, to either strengthen or refute the findings in past cases. When evidence builds to lend support for past findings, those researching the field are successfully advancing their knowledge base. Even when evidence refutes an earlier finding, knowledge is being advanced through the discovery of dissimilarities. Any quest for answers can result in new questions being raised. No less knowledge is gained when apparent disconnects are discovered than when logical connections can be made. Case studies become more significant when additional studies can be compared to past results. Since a symbolic convergence like Bubba could never
be predicted, it had to be studied after the fact, in a postmortem fashion. Though it is clear that circumstances are different from one case to the next, this study may serve as a basis for future reference and comparison by those interested in avoiding the pitfalls identified through this research.

This study has investigated a business organization that was faced with a real world need for organizational change. An old business computer system had to be replaced to prepare for the organization’s future growth. A good deal of time went into weighing the pros and cons of buying and customizing a commercially available system against the option of creating a new system in house, from the ground up. After departmental teams had helped narrow a field of possible system candidates down to three, XYZ Corporation management narrowed their choice down to one system. This new system and those who knew how to run it would help guide the organization into the new millennium. A time of good fortune and prosperity would be ahead and most looked forward to the time when it would be a useful and valued tool.

It was a surprise to many, when a new direction was taken with a decision to create a new system in-house. Implementation timelines for the new system became a logic puzzle and an added source of frustration for the staff at XYZ Corporation as well. As the scope of Bubba’s capabilities continued to grow, the amount of time allocated to get the system running was decreased. The way the scope of the system was changing and expanding, organization members had little or no sense that a master plan was in place. It also appeared that those in charge felt past experience with other business computer systems should somehow equate with a shorter development and introduction cycle for this entirely new system. This led staff members and middle managers alike to
wonder if there were some major misconceptions among the top executives and the new system chief regarding the realities of developing a new and ever changing system in an organization that was unfamiliar with such a task. This would have to take place under the direction of an expert, someone the managers of XYZ Corporation could rely on.

The new system would also need to have a name as it was being developed, and in jest a top manager within the organization suggested it be referred to as, "Bubba". No one knew at the time what this simple name would come to mean, or how the process would play out into a chain of events that would lead to the new system taking on a persona of its own.

In some ways, the persona of the computer system called Bubba at the XYZ Corporation paralleled the persona found in the tale of, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" (Baum, 1900). In Oz, a mysterious and omnipotent entity known to all as the wizard was regarded as an all-knowing savior of the realm. In the end it came to light that the entity everyone thought was a wizard was little more than a mechanism. When it was discovered that a curtain hid the presence of a person in control, notions of what the wizard was capable of dramatically changed. In the case of Bubba, more than one person was behind the proverbial curtain running the machine. The system chief and those in charge who had assigned his people expert power were no less responsible for Bubba's persona than the general staff that felt the new system would be a savior for the organization.

When the characters in the land of Oz found out the wizard was little more than a mechanical facade, they realized they were the ultimately the masters of their own destiny and had the ability to control their own situations. In somewhat the same fashion,
employees of the XYZ Corporation assigned a persona to a machine called Bubba. In the real world saga of Bubba, not everyone necessarily came to feel they were the masters of their own destiny. Their input and past experience with the organization was not always seen as being valued by those in charge, and this led to a group consciousness and changing patterns of communication. In retrospect, these changing communication patterns became the telltale signs that a symbolic convergence had taken place. Some members of the organization decided to move on due to their frustration and disillusionment with the situation. The XYZ Corporation thrives to this day, and continues to experience changes in management, ownership and direction with regard to the system once called Bubba.

This study is important because in many ways, the same scenarios are played out in other organizations faced with a need to integrate new technologies in the most effective and efficient ways possible. The information gathered is interesting because it involved actual circumstances and situations found in a large, U.S. business organization. When it comes to the introduction of new technologies, it can be difficult to put an absolute economic value on any one plan of action versus another. Based on this case study, there are strong indications that fewer difficulties may have been encountered, had more emphasis been placed on the expression of a strong rhetorical, and a clearly understood set of unifying goals. Had a strong vision and plan been shared with each of the organization's internal and external publics, less frustration and confusion may have resulted.

Through a qualitative analysis of themes and the meanings gleaned from the participant's stories, symbolic convergence theory has proven to be a useful and valuable
It has helped expose ways in which an organization might better deal with change and modernization during the introduction of new technologies. In this particular case study, it helped reveal situations that led to the emergence of a group consciousness. By looking back and analyzing the dominant themes that intertwined and linked organization members at the XYZ Corporation, a better understanding of how and why a convergence evolved has been gained. It is hoped that this postmortem case study of the organizational changes that resulted in the symbolic convergence of Bubba may serve as a useful and informative resource for future research.

On the basis of truthfulness, organization members that participated in the study would have had little to gain by misleading or being dishonest in sharing their views. Participants were open in sharing their stories on the chance that doing so might help reveal alternative paths when it comes to organizational change brought into play by the introduction of new technologies.

The use of symbolic convergence theory in this research has revealed a number of key themes and important considerations that would suggest ways of avoiding the negative aspects of similar circumstances. This study has highlighted the importance of a shared vision, open communication, and listening to the concerns of everyone involved during times of major organizational change.

4.05 Limitations

The events analyzed in this research took place five or more years before the study took place. It is recognized that memories of specific events may fade and differ among the participants over time. When the same events are described by a number of people, and study participants use similar or identical detail, the common themes that
emerge become a very powerful and useful tool. As with any case study, these events represent a specific set of circumstances that occurred over a period of time and in different settings. Because of these facts, it is impossible to claim these circumstances are generalizable. It is argued that research of this type is valuable and important when the common themes and lessons learned from one study might lead to important and useful discoveries of similarity or difference in other studies.

It must also be recognized that self-report and memory issues among participants can raise questions concerning reliability. These issues can be countered with the fact that the same stories told by a cross section of people add strength to their claims. Each participant in this case study was an eyewitness. They represent members of various departments in the organization and each had their own view of the XYZ Corporation's new computer system development. When eyewitness accounts back each other up with the same stories, their credibility is increased. This, along with the fact that none of the participants involved with the research had anything tangible to gain by taking part in the research, helps strengthen the value of their contributions. Those that were no longer with the organization had nothing to gain by sharing false, positive or negative input. Those still with the organization since the development of Bubba felt no harm would come as a result of this study being done, and had little fear of reprisal from those in charge of the organization at the time of the study.

Participation, cost and academic time limitations are always issues when doing research. In this case study, twenty past and present organization members were invited to participate and tell their stories. Of this group, eleven agreed to be interviewed to share their experiences and viewpoints regarding the new computer system development
at XYZ Corporation. Though more participants and more time to do research might always be preferred, with six participants being staff members and five participants being managers it is argued that an acceptable mix of views and groups size were used to evaluate the way in which the symbolic convergence of Bubba took place.

Another limitation that needs to be discussed involves the reliability of common testimony versus actual house organ document availability. Research was unable to recover hard copies of the corporate newsletters or memos that referenced the renaming contest and the directives issued to end the use of the name Bubba. There was ample verification by participants that the events aimed at renaming Bubba took place through house organs and meetings, and this was further backed up by testimony from one of the organization members directly involved with the creation of the organization’s newsletters. Since each participant recalled and shared their view of these circumstances there was no question that the incidents occurred. Little would have been gained by fabricating such a story, or recalling fictitious documents to misrepresent their content.

Though there are always limitations to any study or body of research, the common stories and shared experiences of the participants in this postmortem case study established the foundation for identifying themes and the lessons that might be learned from the symbolic convergence of Bubba.

4.06 Future Research Possibilities

In the interest of expanding knowledge in the field of organizational communication, the following research possibilities are offered for consideration. One approach would be to use focus groups representing various organizations that have gone through their own new technology or computer system implementations to compare their
similarities and differences. This type of study and analysis might also be used to identify whether certain types of organizations are more prone to successes or failure than others when it comes to the introduction of new technologies.

In the interest of gaining more knowledge on the way a symbolic convergence fades over time, another area for possible research would be to do a follow up study of the XYZ Corporation’s business computer system. Such a study might reveal how the system once called Bubba has changed since the year 2000. Research could focus on how the old system has continued to evolve, or whether a new system has taken its place. As a comparative study, it would be informative to analyze what changes in ownership; management philosophy or staffing has had with regard to the way organization members communicate about the current system.

Doing follow-up research from a symbolic convergence perspective would not be possible from a participant-observer’s standpoint again, since convergence scenarios cannot be predicted as to when or where they might take place. Future research would need to be approved and be known by the organization’s management, and would need to be tailored to the dynamics that exist under current management philosophies.
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