



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

"Playing the Game": Politicking within a Partnership Structure during a Change Project in a Professional Service Firm

Politicking

noun [U]

UK /'pɒl.ə.tɪ.kɪŋ/ US /'pɑː.lə.tɪk.ɪŋ/

1. The action or practice of engaging in political activity (Lexico by Oxford, 2021)
2. Activity directed towards acquiring power and influence, achieving one's own goals (Collins English Dictionary, 2021)

by

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Abstract

Title	"Playing the Game": Politicking within a Partnership Structure during a Change Project in a Professional Service Firm
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Purpose	This study aims to examine how a partnership structure in a professional service firm causes political action by stakeholders within an organization and what effect this has on collaboration. As our case organization has a distinctive organizational structure characterized by a partnership structure, separate services and a strong incentive system, we argue that these factors have an impact on political behavior and thus on cross-service collaboration in the context of a change project.
Theoretical Background	In our theoretical background we outline existing literature on concepts of formal and informal organizational structure. Furthermore, we present previous research on organizational politics in the context of change and the interrelation of organizational structure and organizational politics.
Methodology	As part of our qualitative case study, we conducted nine semi-structured interviews and examined secondary data in the form of internal written material. This research is an abductive approach, being influenced by the interpretive research tradition.
Findings	Based on the empirical material, we found that a partnership structure in Professional Service Firms (PSFs) leads to clashing interests of various stakeholders which consequently results in politicking and impeded collaboration.
Contributions	With our study, we provide a deeper insight into the political actions of partners and change managers in partnership-based PSFs that arise due to organizational conditions.
Keywords	partnership structure, organizational politics, collaboration, change project, professional service firm

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

"The magical formula is: know unspoken rules and create certain dependencies, according to the principle: 'if you help me, I help you'. This is how you can achieve personal goals and understand how political mechanisms work at Alpha.

And certainly, it is applied quite consciously." – Philip, Partner at Alpha

(Interview, 5th of April 2021)

Achieving specific goals by being tactical and strategic is not uncommon in business. In fact, it is considered perfectly normal for individuals in the business world, regardless of hierarchical level, to pursue their personal interests or aims. These interests can be of different nature, such as career ambitions, disfavor, or the will to carry out a particular project successfully, and thus, strategies are developed for this purpose. The literature refers to the strategies to accomplish personal aims with the term 'organizational politics' (Cacciattolo, 2013). According to Neuberger (2006), organizational politics is an indirect form of social activities occurring daily in organizations. The underlying action of organizational politics to achieve one's own objectives within the company is described as 'politicking' by Buchanan and Badham (2008). They also state that it often has an adverse connotation and is easily associated with intrigues such as playing off others or "dirty tricks" (p.12). Furthermore, Buchanan and Huczynski (2019) claim that organizational politics is based on people's pursuits to realize their ambitions, which might partially clash with the interests of others. Besides, political affairs are frequently underestimated or not sufficiently managed during project implementation (Lientz & Rea, 2004). However, according to Hofmann and Strikker (2011), organizational politics should not generally be labeled as negative, but rather understood as a specific role behavior of managers that can unleash innovation, creativity, and expertise.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of one's own aims, especially in the highly competitive market of Professional Service Firms (PSFs), greatly impacts the organization itself and the interaction between colleagues, superiors, and subordinates within the organization. This impact arises because individuals frequently tend to become politically active to fight for their objectives. Politicking is particularly evident in the internal change management of PSFs (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). These internal projects are supposed to increase the success of an organization

as they, for instance, enhance internal procedures and promote a sense of community among the stakeholders. Yet, those projects are often not given top priority and are frequently perceived as additional work and effort. Moreover, in most cases, involvement in internal change projects is not part of the incentive system, including target agreements that employees at higher levels of the hierarchy are expected to achieve. Employees are strongly driven by those target agreements, on the one hand, because of the pressure to deliver the required performance, on the other hand, due to the possibility of receiving bonuses. Therefore, according to Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017), a successful implementation of internal change projects is complex and frequently fails, as resentment against an internal change project combined with the pressure of target agreements often leads to employees resisting. For that reason, the authors argue that resistance is one of the main causes of failure. The failure has multiple faces with the consequence that employees are taking strategic action against the project and thus become politically active (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017).

Change managers, whose task is to implement the internal change project successfully, must be prepared for these acts and behave politically occasionally to meet their targets. This results in two different perspectives on an internal change project, connected with two different approaches to organizational politics: On the one hand, stakeholders who consider the change project not as their top priority or even as a burden and thus politically oppose the project through resistance. On the other hand, change managers who aim to implement the internal change project and therefore act politically to steer the resistant employees in the right direction.

For this thesis, we studied our case company Alpha, an accounting and consulting firm with a distinctive organizational structure consisting of 1) different units, so-called services that mainly work separately from each other. Additionally, Alpha is characterized by 2) a partnership structure, which entails that the partners, who are employees at the top hierarchical level, own shares in the company and are thus business owners within the company. In addition, the organization uses 3) target agreements and incentives to steer the partners. We took a closer look at the link between underlying organizational structures and the desire to pursue personal goals, which is particularly visible in change projects. For this purpose, we interviewed employees of our case organization Alpha and examined internal documents.

Alpha is continuously aiming to improve the company's overall performance and tries to ensure that all services and employees act as a united team. For this purpose, the organization has introduced the overarching project 'OneAlpha'. According to Alpha (2021), OneAlpha serves

as a vision and is the "path to becoming the first choice for our customers, our employees, and the public.". Within the project, Alpha is currently conducting various internal change initiatives with the primary aim to strengthen cross-service cooperation.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

Although the literature offers a substantial body of theoretical knowledge on both organizational structure and organizational politics, studies on the relationship between organizational structure and organizational politics are scarce. In particular, we noticed a lack of research on the impact of a partnership structure in PSFs on political activity within an organization.

Furthermore, we agree with Gardner (2015) that more research should be done on the relation of collaboration and compensation systems in PSFs. Since Alpha aims to strengthen the collaboration among partners and has a distinct incentive system (Alpha, 2021), the future research proposed by Gardner (2015) would be relevant to us. In addition, we encounter the fact that not all PSFs are partnership-led, which means that not all existing literature on PSFs applies to our study.

Concerning research on organizational politics, we agree with Vigoda-Gadot and Drory (2006). They argue that organizational politics is challenging to research because it is a highly sensitive topic. Thus, the various stakeholders are reluctant to reveal the political tactics and secrets they use to achieve their own objectives. Buchanan and Badham (2008) support this statement, arguing that this sensibility "stifles candid responses" (p.3). In addition, Doldor (2007) mentions a second reason: numerous terminologies describe the political events within an organization. Therefore, it is complicated for a non-expert to find the broad spectrum of relevant literature, as he or she does not know which terms to search for. Doldor (2007) continues that once the jungle of terms has been combed and relevant literature has been retrieved, one must realize that the terms can be easily exchanged. In her eyes, this indicates a "lack of theoretical maturity in this field of study" (p.12). Moreover, she noticed that the available studies all acknowledged a lack of expertise in the field of organizational politics.

Although we are aware that Doldor's claim might be outdated, we still find it relevant, as we experienced the same issues during our research for this study. Besides, recent authors (e.g., Kulikowska-Pawlak, 2018; Rogers, De Brún, Birken, Davies, McAuliffe, 2020) also explain

that extensive implications for organizational politics are restricted, as there are barely any studies on this specific topic.

To address this critique and counteract the identified deficiency, we will analyze Alpha's underlying organizational structure and its internal organizational politics based on a change project. Thus, this study aims to provide deeper insights into partnership structures in PSFs and their organizational politics. The outcomes of our study will contribute to raising greater sensibility for the topic to gain a deeper understanding of the causes, actions, and outcomes of organizational politics and, ultimately, to manage them effectively. Since our study's scope is limited, we can only draw partial conclusions for the whole organization.

Considering the previously outlined context, our study aims to explore the following questions:

- 1. How does a partnership structure in Professional Service Firms trigger political action?*
- 2. What is the effect of a partnership structure on collaboration in Professional Service Firms?*

1.3 Research Outline

In the following, we present the contents of our thesis. In **chapter two**, we will outline the theoretical background for our study. The chapter will provide the reader with the opinions of different authors and the knowledge discovered so far. Concepts on organizational structures of PSFs, organizational politics, and their connection will be explained. **Chapter three** consists of our applied methodology and describes the data we used for our study and how we collected it. Additionally, we will draw on the concept of reflexivity and conclude by reflecting on the limitations of our study. **Chapter four** illustrates our empirical findings with excerpts from the document analysis and our interviews. In **chapter five**, we will link our findings to the literature and put them into context with existing concepts. In this chapter, we will also answer our research questions. Lastly, in **chapter six**, we will summarize our main findings and theoretical contributions, outline future research possibilities, and finally, highlight our findings' relevance by giving practical implications.

2 Literature Review

The chapter of the literature review aims to outline the theoretical background for our study. As there is an extensive body of literature and concepts in the areas of organizational structure and organizational politics, we refrain from presenting a holistic literature review. Instead, we focus on selected concepts that we consider essential to provide an orientation for our case study. Firstly, we portray the relevant literature on organizational structure, focusing on formal and informal structures of Professional Service Firms (PSFs). The second section draws on the literature of organizational politics. Thirdly, we clarify the relationship between the two concepts. In the last section, we conclude the chapter with a summary of the theoretical concepts.

2.1 Organizational Structure of Professional Service Firms

Before addressing the specific organizational structure of PSFs, it is helpful to provide a brief contextualization. PSFs represent a particular category of firms and differ significantly from most organizations (Maister, 1982). Therefore, the following subchapter focuses on such firms to provide a grounding for our study.

PSFs are considered knowledge-intensive firms, but not all knowledge-intensive firms are PSFs and, therefore, represent a sub-category (Løwendahl, 2005). Accordingly, knowledge is one of the most studied topics within PSFs, referred to as a key asset (Skjølsvik, Perner & Løwendahl, 2017). Løwendahl (2005) attributes the following characteristics to PSFs: they are knowledge-intensive, and individuals with higher education operate as experts within them. Besides, PSFs require a high degree of customization and effort, as well as personal assessments of the experts to deliver the service. Additionally, interactions with the customer play a significant role. The service is carried out with the highest norms of conduct, which means that customer needs are above the company's profit (Løwendahl (2005). Other characteristics have been identified by Alvesson, Kärreman and Sullivan (2015), who note that PSFs perform knowledge-intensive work, particularly in the delivery of services to clients. Furthermore, they are low capital intensive, as the work is "immaterial and ambiguous rather than material labor" (p.406) and results in professionals who feel the need to be elitist (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

As one of the earlier researchers in this field, Maister (1993) claims that two fundamental dimensions differentiate managerial challenges in PSFs: one is the aforementioned high degree

of customization, making it almost impossible to apply traditional management principles such as standardization or supervision. Secondly, face-to-face interaction with the customer leads to the need for specific skills from employees. Von Nordenflycht (2010) further states that it is the dependence on the expertise and knowledge of the staff that distinguishes PSFs from other types of firms. Due to this distinction, these firms' internal management and organization represent a relevant research topic in the literature (Skjølsvik, Perner & Løwendahl, 2017).

Considering organizational structure in general, researchers define it as a basic framework of roles, clusters of positions, reporting relationships, and interaction patterns that an organization utilizes to achieve its goals (Barney & Griffin, 1992; Bartol & Martin, 1994; Mintzberg, 1993). The differentiation between formal and informal structures in organizations is frequently mentioned in the literature as interrelated and coexistent (Baker, Gibbons, & Murphy, 1999; Mintzberg, 1983; Watson & Weaver, 2003). Furthermore, there is agreement amongst researchers that both forms of structure fulfill organizational goals and personal interests. According to Rank (2008), formal structures, on the one hand, are a "result of deliberate decisions and an organizational design intended to maximize effectiveness" (p.145), while informal structures, on the other hand, emerge as a result of interaction patterns between individuals in organizations. As formal structures are utilized, informal structures arise simultaneously, adding further structure to the organization (Brass, 1984). Moreover, Rank (2008) argues that formal structures can also be undermined, for example, when individuals are formally considered collaborating but informally avoid doing so, thereby replacing formal structures.

2.1.1 Formal Structures

While studying the same phenomenon, Mintzberg (1983) defines formal structures as the organizational factor for the authority-subordinate relationship, and Rishipal (2014) focuses his research on the framework of formal relationships in organizations. As a result, he identifies them as providers for clarity regarding responsibilities, authorities, accountabilities, and communication lines. Furthermore, he argues that even though traditional organizations usually follow a particular organizational structure, there may be individual departments or teams that follow other structures or, in rare cases, organizations that have established a combination of structures. PSFs represent one such case, being partnership-based on the one hand but also having a multiplex form with various internal structures on the other hand (Kaiser & Ringlsetter, 2010; Morris, Greenwood & Fairclough, 2010). This finding is supported by Levin

and Tadelis (2002) as well, who state that traditional organizational forms are common in technology or manufacturing companies, while the specific partnership form is often found in human capital based PSFs.

Today, most PSFs are still organized in partnerships (Greenwood, Morris, Fairclough & Boussebaa, 2010). The defining characteristic of a partnership is the redistribution of profits among the partners, who are usually shareholders of the firm (Levin & Tadelis, 2002). Another characteristic of partnerships is presented by Maister (1982), stating that the formal structure provides a clear career path and is usually a hierarchy of three levels: consultant, manager, and partner. According to the author, the two fundamental influences on the organizational structure of PSFs are the occurrence of project work with a variety of projects and the target workload of the employees that partners must secure. Jehle (2007) defines the basic partnership model as the partners, predominantly shareholders in the companies, that form the upper management level as senior professionals. Moreover, he describes the hierarchical structure as a pyramid, with the partners at the top, whose field of responsibility mainly comprises acquisition, client management, and the company's management. These partners lead their managers, who are the organization's mid-level staff, supervise ongoing client projects, and guide and coordinate the associates. The associates source and analyze the information necessary for the individual projects and support the managers in various tasks (Jehle, 2007).

A slightly different partnership concept is presented by Kampe (2011), who distinguishes between the professional partnership as a traditional form and the managed professional business as a modern alternative. According to the author, the professional partnership is characterized by the ownership and control of the partners. Accordingly, strategic and operational decision-making is based on a representative democracy among the partners. In addition, within a professional partnership, there is no separation between professional and management tasks. Presently, this organizational form is only found in smaller professional service firms, while larger ones have the managed professional business (Kampe, 2011). The author describes a stronger focus on productivity, service, competition, growth strategies, and cross-selling. Similarly, Malhotra, Morris, and Hinings (2006) argue this focus is also found in industrial companies, most of them having matrix structures. Although the managed professional business additionally consists of the collective partners at the strategic top, the authors state that management instance and service structure differ from professional partnerships.

As indicated in the first paragraph, in addition to partnerships, Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2010) clarify that PSFs choose a specific organizational form to gain a competitive advantage through specialization. Since specialization leads to the emergence of many sub-units, the structure must have mechanisms to ensure it remains integrated despite differentiation (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2010). This concept is also addressed by Greenwood et al. (2010), who explain that PSFs have acquired differentiated structures because of their complex environment, in which it is not easy to hold them together. For this reason, they continue, a multiplex organizational form has prevailed, which is structurally differentiated along the three axes of geographical location, lines of service, and industry or market specialization.

Noting the coexistence of the multiplex formal structure and partnerships, several researchers observed a shift away from pure seniority-based profit-sharing to transforming partnership-based firms into a more corporate-like structure (Empson & Chapman, 2006; Levin & Tadelis, 2002). Even if this finding is in line with Greenwood et al.'s (2010) research on the structurally differentiated organizational form, most PSFs are still organized as partnerships that need to keep growing to stay profitable and meet career expectations (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2010). Rajan and Zingales (2000) criticize the factor of constant growth as partners in PSFs should focus on enterprise value rather than shareholder value. Consequently, the authors recommend that partners consider the whole organization in terms of stakeholders rather than focusing too much on themselves as shareholders.

2.1.2 Informal Structures

Along with formal structures, organizations often display social relations that do not only follow official rules and formalities (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011). According to Zenger, Lazzarini, and Poppo (2000), these unofficial mechanisms can be found primarily in the context of interaction and social guidelines. The authors list norms, values, verbal and non-verbal behavior patterns, and communication as examples. Several contributors confirm the emergence of repetitive interaction patterns as an informal, social, or even network structure (Hunter, 2015; Krackhardt, 1994; McEvily, Soda & Tortoriello, 2014). Such a structure is defined by Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) as a "person-dependent social [relationship] of dominance and subordinate" (p.1517), which arises through social interaction, but mainly persists through constant repetition of social processes. Hunter, Bentzen, and Taug's (2020) research supports this perspective, noting that informal linkages based on interpersonal relationships and connections between employees form a network.

To underline the network concept, successful PSFs focus on forming a 'one-firm' organizational model, which is intended to be the base for a strong culture of collaboration (Maister, 1993). This organization model is primarily characterized by loyalty and group performance, providing a crucial component for PSFs' success (Maister, 1985). Collaboration in PSFs usually implies working in project teams (Sydow, Lindkvist & DeFillippi, 2004). The allocation from professionals to different project teams provides the basis for community formation in which personal networks can grow, according to Greenwood et al. (2010). By supporting the formation of such networks, the authors argue, firms avoid turning individual axes into silos. As practical examples, they firstly mention service lines that are not exclusive communities but also have overlaps. Secondly, Greenwood et al. (2010) identify professionals who have many roles in these communities in parallel since they are part of a service line, an industry group, or a geographical location and have different clients at the same time.

In general, working in project teams shows two basic structural characteristics: the boundaries of teamwork are clarified by affiliation, responsibility, and time; thus, team members work together for a certain period of time to complete a task and then separate again (Sydow, Lindkvist & DeFillippi, 2004). In addition, project teams typically have a hierarchical structure with a leader and juniors working on the project (Edmondson & Nembhard, 2009). In PSFs, partners or staffers usually select the teams with the right skills according to the project's specificities (Gardner, 2015). However, this traditional delivery of project work is becoming increasingly "fluid" (p.375) in PSFs, meaning teamwork is rather open-ended as there is more dynamic in organizations (Gardner, 2015). A reason for that includes the need for staff to focus on multiple projects simultaneously, which blurs their membership of teams (O'Leary, Mortensen & Woolley, 2011). Furthermore, due to adjustments in external environmental factors such as changes in project settings or staff turnover, membership changes are increasingly frequent (Huckman, Staats & Upton, 2009).

Especially the collaboration of partners in PSFs represents a distinctive aspect in the researchers' descriptions (Bedwell, Wildman, DiazGranados, Salazar, Kramer, & Salas, 2012; Gardner, 2015; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2010). According to Gardner (2015), multi-team membership has become the norm in collaboration models, especially for partners. She exemplifies this with partners who work on acquiring new clients with one team while managing existing clients and projects with several other teams making them more dynamic in their team affiliations. In addition, there is evidence in research that power dynamics in teamwork differ significantly from peer collaboration of partners (Bedwell et al. 2012; Galanter

& Palay, 1994; Lazega, 2001). This difference can emerge because partners are in a position to decide more autonomously whether and in which projects they get involved and interact with each other in an equal manner (Lazega, 2001). While partners understand and support the benefits of a one-firm strategy that demands collaboration, Greenwood et al. (2010) state that some partners are very sensitive about 'their' clients. Moreover, von Nordenflycht (2010) argues the diffuse power structures at these high hierarchical levels make it difficult to promote or even demand cooperation. He explains the rise of these challenges due to the partners being shareholders and having significantly more power over a PSF than in other organizations.

Further research has been conducted to explore why autonomous partners choose to collaborate. In a multi-method field study, Gardner and Valentine (2014) found that it mainly depends on how the individuals can personally benefit from the collaboration compared to the effort they have to put in. The respondents perceived the risk of working with peers as potential damage to their personal image, and most were skeptical about whether working together would help them individually (Gardner & Valentine, 2014). In contrast, a few described the beneficial reputation they received from the collaboration. As a result of frequently collaborating and thus performing better in the following year, their increased internal company-wide reputation supported them in attracting clients and generating revenue. A similar conclusion occurs in Briscoe and Tsai's (2011) study of a law firm that observed how multidisciplinary collaboration could increase revenue. Accordingly, Greenwood et al. (2010) identify what motivates partners to work together is a "culture of reciprocity" (p.176). The authors define this culture as one that ties the organizational structure together, based on four reinforcing elements: organizational strategy and rhetoric, role models, alignment of organizational processes, and visible consequences of reciprocal relationships.

Although there are some studies on the informal structures of PSFs, Gardner (2015) notes that these could be further developed in future research connected with collaboration. Specifically, she recommends examining whether and how the collective benefits of firms are affected when partners are not motivated to use collaboration. In addition, she criticizes that not enough is known about, for example, the impact of the compensation system on willingness to collaborate or what types of performance management systems can encourage or undermine it. Klimkeit (2013) points out similar research areas, clarifying in his study that hardly any research has been conducted on the effects of, for instance, change on project dynamics, including collaboration.

2.2 Organizational Politics

The academic literature describes politics in organizations with various expressions (e.g., Cacciattolo, 2013; Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006). Therefore, terms such as 'organizational politics', 'workplace politics', 'micro-politics', and 'internal politics', can be considered synonymous. Consequently, 'politicking', 'political tactics', and 'political behavior' are the actions individuals execute in political organizations. To provide clarity, Pfeffer (1992) has drawn the comparison of governmental politics and organizational politics, as he claims that each organization is like a government in itself. Hence, in his opinion, to grasp the organization's structure and culture, one has to comprehend organizational politics; just as to understand a government, one has to read the governmental politics behind it.

In the literature, there are two evident camps with opposing views on organizational politics: on the one hand, Mintzberg (1983) notes the downsides of organizational politics and depict it as "individual or group behavior that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in the technical sense, illegitimate" (p.172). On the other hand, Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, and Ammeter (2004) recognize the benefits of applying organizational politics, and thus, define it as "the ability to understand others at work effectively, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (p.311). Neuberger (2002) also appreciates the advantages of organizational politics and advises not generally associating organizational politics with a negative connotation or vicious activities. Instead, he argues that politicking can foster collaboration, as it creates trust and team spirit within organizations in the long term. However, to avoid any bias, for our study, we use Burns' definition (1962 cited in Neuberger, 2006), which takes a neutral view of organizational politics and describes it as follows: "Behavior is identified as political when others are made use of as resources in competitive situations" (p.18).

Although authors cannot agree on a general definition, according to Vigoda-Gadot and Drory (2006), they all share a common characteristic, which is "the use of personal or aggregate power to influence others and achieve one's own goals in the workplace" (p.ix). Buchanan and Badham (1999) argue that power is traditionally defined as "the capacity of individuals to exert their will over others" (p.611), while organizational politics can be seen as power in action, which can be carried out through various techniques and tactics. This statement follows Pfeffer (1992), who recognizes a relationship between politics and power, explaining that power is the

capability to influence others, overcome resistance, and change the direction of a project. In contrast, he portrays politics as a process or action through which power is exercised. Fleming and Spicer (2007) support Pfeffer's point of view and argue that power is embedded in many organizational, political practices, and thus, firmly established in organizations in general. Therefore, everyone within an organization, regardless of hierarchical level, uses power to pursue individual and organizational targets (Fairholm, 2009). In line with this, Weissenberger and Teufel (2011) distinguish between 'formal power', which is related to hierarchical structures, and 'informal power' that can be generated through particular abilities and personality features. Also, Doldor (2007) is convinced that those abilities of political nature are crucial to gain organizational power and exercise power. Thus, she continues, organizational politics have to be considered to understand power. Vice versa, in Vince's (2010) opinion, organizational politics can be used strategically to prevent or defy power relations.

In addition to the strong relationship between power and politics, several authors agree that change processes are inseparable from those two components (e.g., Dawson, 2003; Pettigrew, 1973). This inseparability arises because change processes can create disagreement and uncertainty among employees. Consequently, employees are concerned about the impact the change project will have on their jobs and work capacity and how their relationship with colleagues will be affected (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). In their study, Drory and Romm (1990) found out that political activities are applied to pursue and prevent organizational goals and, in addition, to realize individual and professional ambitions. Vigoda (2003) agrees and argues that to enhance personal and organizational objectives, stakeholders use influence tactics as organizational politics.

According to Maute and Locander (1994), influence is equivalent to 'informal power'. Thus, influencing activities are utilized to achieve either individual or collective interests, as Bozeman, Hochwarter, Perrewé, and Brymer (2001) state. Furthermore, they are convinced that employees apply influencing strategies to prevent adverse outcomes, such as the failure of a change project, within the organization. To adopt influencing strategies is in agreement with Kipnis and Schmidt (1982 cited in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), who argue that political activities are carried out through "informal social influence tactics" (p.16). In accordance, Drory and Romm (1988) discovered that stakeholders perceive political behavior as informal activities instead of formal actions. Among other examples for informal influence tactics, Romm and Pliskin (1997) mention coalition-building, which was later confirmed by

Buchanan's (2008) study outcome. This implies that individuals create alliances with others and thus, as a more powerful entity, try to undermine agendas or initiatives and ultimately jeopardize or support the success of change projects. According to Forsyth (2019), within coalition-building, employees need to find their place within the group and conform to group norms. He further states that group members need to learn how to best interact with others, as "distinctive networks of communication and influence" (p.18) are a significant element of group dynamics. As a result, individuals often unconsciously learn to engage in political games and enhance them (Cacciattolo, 2013).

According to various scholars, organizational, political behavior is evident in many change processes at multiple levels (Buchanan & Badham, 2020; Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006). Furthermore, Lientz and Rea (2004) are convinced that all members within an organization are aware that politics is present in their company. Nevertheless, they continue, the topic of organizational politics is not explicitly discussed in most organizations, as it is instead a "hidden agenda" (p.42) that impacts all organizational members. Due to this impact, Doldor (2007) argues that political activities are closely linked to power and hence, an effective way to develop and reinforce one's position within the organization. Luthans, Rosenkrantz, and Hennessey (1985) identify a significant correlation between the managers' success and the extent to which they use political tactics. This correlation aligns with Mintzberg's (1973) observations that managers focus on engaging in social interactions to build a network and exercising power rather than performing classic managerial duties such as monitoring, delegating, and coordinating. Therefore, Buchanan and Badham (2020) claim that change managers should be aware of organizational politics, as politicking can stimulate or assist the progress of change projects in implementing a change process successfully. According to the authors, managers are even convinced that change agents must conduct political activities to complete the change project successfully.

Taking the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences of organizational politics in change processes into consideration, Buchanan (2008) established the A-B-C model. This model is based on a quantitative study in which the author discovered that different goals, interests, and opinions among stakeholders are the causes for organizational politics. Those causes can be either on an individual or contextual level. In Buchanan's (2008) model, the variety of political activities resulting from those factors are categorized by relevance, depending on the frequency they are utilized (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). Buchanan and Badham (2020) uncover that the

most common tactics within organizational politics are "building a network of useful contacts", "making friends with power brokers", and "bending the rules to fit the situation" (p.53). Depending on the context, politicking can have either 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' outcomes on both individual and organizational levels. Furthermore, they reveal that political tactics are frequently applied in change processes to either "block or drive" (p.60) the project. Besides, 81% of the study participants believe that "political tactics can be effective in dealing with resistance to change" (p.55). Thus, political action is not inevitably perceived as harmful but illustrates once again the 'dual effect' of political behavior.

2.3 Organizational Structure and Organizational Politics

According to Vredenburg and Shea-VanFossen (2010), Darwin's theory of evolution is part of the reason why politics emerges in the workplace. They claim that the individuals who are most adaptable to certain organizational conditions will succeed in the organization in line with the 'survival of the fittest'. Moreover, Nicholson (1997) highlights that humans have a natural urge to feel power, which impacts organizational politics. However, Vredenburg and Shea-VanFossen (2010) are also convinced that humans' natural traits are not the only cause of organizational politics, as political behavior is an interplay between biological components and organizational elements. This correlation is supported by Gotsis and Kortezi (2010). They claim that individuals are more likely to follow their instincts and thus, engage in political activity if there is competition among stakeholders and organizational uncertainty in decision-making processes or performance assessments.

Similarly, Giddens (1984) argues that the concept of structural duality is a cause for organizational politics. According to him, the concept is based on a tight, recursive connection between the social actions of individuals and social or organizational structures, as they are mutually dependent and permanently interrelated. Thus, Felsch (2010) states that structures are both the result and the medium of action and consequently enable and constrain activities that reproduce or change structures. Additionally, she is convinced that interactive organizational action is always dependent on the (power-)structured context, namely the existing possibilities, resources, and constraints, and at the same time autonomous. Therefore, structures are generated, reproduced, and modified in micropolitical action (Felsch, 2010). Alt (2001) agrees and claims that aligned interests cannot be assumed within organizational processes and procedures. Hence, actors attempt to steer the process in a direction they desire. Consequently, organizational activities are interest-driven and political.

Furthermore, Vredenburg and Shea-VanFossen (2010) claim that organizational politics is closely linked to organizational culture and individuals' personal setting, which, thus, is attributed to the organizational structure. The basis for this proposition is provided by Buchanan (2008), who discovered that politics emerge through structural relationships in an organization. Vince (2010) has a similar view, distinguishing between 'social politics', which arise because of race, disability, gender, or other differences, and 'strategic politics' created by specific activities of the organization. He explains that strategic politics arise from repetitive conflicts about leadership and the organization between different individuals or groups. For this reason, Vince (2010) believes that strategic politics "is concerned with the strategic consequences of behavior in organizations and how this links to the emergence of organizational structure and designs that then have an impact on behavior" (p.66). Therefore, Iyamu (2013) concludes that "organizational structure is a key component of organizational politics, and power is the focal point of organizational structure" (p.169).

Moreover, Vigoda-Gadot and Drory (2006) claim that organizational politics can enable the capability to identify and grasp collaboration, informal conflict processes, structures, and intangible dynamics within the organization. This proposition is in accordance with Kulikowska-Pawlak (2018), who links organizational politics to the principle of sense-making. As a basis for this, she adopts Sederberg's definition (1984 cited in Kulikowska-Pawlak, 2018), who interprets organizational politics as an activity for "creating, sustaining, modifying, and abandoning shared meanings" (p.7). Kulikowska-Pawlak (2018) clarifies that organizational members have a particular opinion and attempt to transfer it to others through various influencing tactics. Her statement is consistent with Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2003) concept of 'nurturing', describing that nurturing managers influence other stakeholders to gain their support. Morris, Greenwood, and Fairclough (2010) claim that searching for supporters is particularly common in PSFs, as PSFs are "uniquely political environments" (p.297).

On this account, Clark and Geppert (2011) identify organizational sense-making as a political tactic. Particularly in change projects, the concept of sense-making is frequently adopted by change managers (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). According to Palmer, Dunford, and Buchanan (2017), employees wish to understand the need and the purpose of the change process. Therefore, change managers should become sense-makers and provide transparency and clarity. Geigle and Bailey (2001 cited in Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017) share this

view and suggest that change managers should not act as 'reporters' but ensure all stakeholders recognize the value of the change process.

2.4 Summary of Theoretical Concepts

Firstly, we noticed that PSFs are characterized by several features, such as a strong focus on interpersonal relationships, e.g., with customers (Løwendahl, 2005). Mintzberg (1993) and other researchers agree that formal and informal structures generally exist in organizations and influence each other. Especially in PSFs, varying interests prevail (Maister, 1993) and thus indicate informal structures. Thereby, our literature review suggests that PSFs are, on the one hand, often partnership-based and strongly hierarchical (Maister, 1993), but on the other hand, following additional dimensions seeking to match the market as closely as possible to gain competitive advantage (Greenwood et al. 2010). In particular, our focus on informal structures concerned the social interactions that occur in PSFs. Partners often act very autonomously due to their shareholder role and demonstrate a lack of interest in collaboration (Gardner & Valentine, 2014). To encourage cooperation, we cite Greenwood et al.'s (2010) approach to a 'culture of reciprocity', which, with its four elements, is intended to promote collaboration from a cultural perspective. Secondly, we aimed to increase the understanding of organizational politics, which is perceived contrarily (e.g., Ahearn et al. 2004; Mintzberg, 1983; Neuberger, 2002). Nevertheless, both perspectives share the characteristic of power, which is closely related to politics (Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006). Besides, change projects are also a catalyst for organizational politics (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). According to various writers (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973; Dawson, 2003), especially in change processes, individual and organizational goals move to the center of attention, and thus the interests of stakeholders might collide. In order to assert one's own opinion or goal, a common tactic is to influence others and thereby build coalitions. The third subchapter demonstrates the connection between organizational structure and organizational politics. According to Nicholson (1997), organizational politics is caused by an interplay between humans' natural power traits and organizational structure. Furthermore, organizational politics has an impact on the structures of an organization and vice versa (Gidden, 1984; Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010). Additionally, Vigoda and Drory (2006) argue that organizational politics reveals the structures and intangible dynamics within an organization, which Kulikowska-Pawlak (2018) describes as the principle of sense-making. Change managers often apply this principle to implement change projects successfully (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017).

3 Methodology

This chapter provides an in-depth explanation of how we conducted our research. Firstly, we outline the philosophical grounding, followed by our general research approach and context. Later on, we outline our process of data collection and data analysis. The chapter concludes with our aim for reflexivity and the limitations of our study.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

Our study aims to obtain a deep understanding of the complex link between organizational structure in PSFs, and organizational politics during a change process. Therefore, our main interest is to understand the people involved, including their perceptions, motivations, and interests. To contextualize these highly subjective factors in our research, we considered an interpretive approach to be appropriate. Within the interpretive research traditions, as portrayed by Prasad (2018), the main tradition we were influenced by is the symbolic interactionism that considers research within the field as an "intimate understanding of social situations largely from the standpoint of participants themselves" (p.23). We argue that this 'intimate understanding' is necessary to explore a sensitive topic such as organizational politics. Moreover, we consider Mead's (1966 cited in Prasad, 2018) research of the symbolic role of self-image and its relevance in social interactions as a primary inspiration. The author summarizes this as a continuous decision-making process of the way individuals behave and act. The symbolic interactionism tradition is characterized by in-depth interviews, focusing on the underlying meaning of specific situations, and asking 'why' rather than 'what' questions (Prasad, 2018). Particularly for the interconnected phenomena of organizational structure and organizational politics in the context of change, 'why' questions offer the interviewees necessary interpretive flexibility to picture both situations and self-image.

3.2 Research Approach

As mentioned earlier, our study is influenced by interpretive traditions aimed to answer our research questions. Following a qualitative research approach, in-depth interviews within a single case study framework allow us to analyze in a nuanced way.

Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2015) describe different types of research strategies that require a distinction on how each contributes to answering the research questions. One of these

strategies, the authors list, is the case study. It is appropriate when a "rich understanding of the context of the research and the process being enacted" (p.139) is desired. Yin (2003) also argues that context, in particular, adds value to case studies. Furthermore, the author differentiates between single and multiple as well as holistic and embedded cases. In our study, we chose a single case study, which enabled us to look at a specific organization with its contextual factors while remaining within our thesis's scope. By selecting different, relevant departments and interviewees with diverse expertise, the study can be considered an embedded case study, as more than one unit is analyzed (Yin, 2003).

Scholars commonly refer to the three main approaches when researching in a business context: induction, deduction, and abduction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The inductive approach implies that theory is an outcome of the research, whereas, in a deductive approach, underlying theory guides the research. (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Abduction is a combination of the former approaches, where researchers enter with prior knowledge of theories but remain open to new findings and observations during the empirical process (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). For us, this resulted in the possibility to combine existing, relevant theory with new findings and enabled us to deal reflexively and adaptively with our interview questions when we notice unexpected turns. As our topic of interest is initially rather broad, this abductive approach helped us to adapt our theoretical concepts throughout the research process. Given the time constraints of our research, our interviews were conducted over a period of three weeks. Thus, our time horizon is what Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2015) call a "snapshot taken at a particular time" (p.148), classified as a cross-sectional study.

3.3 Research Context

This section provides the context of our research, specifically the background to our case study. In case studies, the case selection is highly relevant to meet the research criteria and the research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, identifying a suitable company with the proper context for our research was our priority from the beginning and consisted of our following three criteria: Primarily, the company needed to be a partnership-based organization with a distinct organizational structure. In addition, it should ideally be knowledge-intensive, preferably involving individuals in the service sector as the main business to increase the likelihood of politicking. Thirdly, we needed the organization to go through a change to observe a specific point in time, "the snapshot" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015, p.148). We felt

that our chosen company, Alpha, met these criteria. The insights about Alpha presented below were gathered from the organization's internal material and were part of our document analysis using secondary data, which we explain further in section 3.4.3.

As pointed out in the introduction, we have decided to anonymize the case organization we are studying under the name Alpha. Alpha is a leading global accounting and consulting firm with several business divisions, internally called services. The company's five comprehensive services are Audit, Tax, Consulting, Financial Services, and Deal Advisory. Our study focused on the German entity, its organizational structure, and the organizational politics that emerge from it in the context of a change project.

The focus of our study is based on the firm's ongoing internal change project with the name OneAlpha and its vision to become unified. Because of an inherent matrix structure in the partnership-led company, which brings various reporting lines and gives rise to many individual performers, the organization's main strategy is to achieve cultural change by increasing collaboration. The project was established several years ago and includes several small change initiatives, some of which have now reached the final implementation stage. To not threaten the implementation progress of these initiatives through our sometimes critical interview questions, we were asked by the organization to only refer to the overarching project OneAlpha in our interviews.

To better understand the initiatives within OneAlpha, we have chosen to explain one of them that has just been launched as an example. The initiative of the rotational program will enable employees to rotate for a few months, regardless of the service line they are employed in, and thus gain new experience, get to know other teams, clients, and projects. Besides the opportunity for employees to develop their skills, the company's reason for introducing the project is to strengthen the collaboration model at Alpha. Employees are expected to return to their previous partner after completing some time in another service under a different partner. This initiative, like many others, has aroused a lot of attention during its implementation, as many partners are afraid of losing staff in their teams.

As depicted in the literature review, partners are often shareholders and, like in most partnership-based companies, the position generally represents the top level of the career ladder with their own teams and clients. In Alpha's case, there is also an Executive Board overarching the partnership structure, which is in charge of the company's management. Overall, around five percent of Alpha's employees are partners. Consequently, they have a particular interest in

the company's success and act similarly to small business owners in a large company. Partners are allocated to one of Alpha's five services where they work in smaller thematic areas, so-called service lines, to serve their external customers. Besides, not all partners are equal in their hierarchical positions as there are added roles like service head or solution line head. To accompany the implementation of the internal change, Alpha has in-house change managers primarily located in the central function within the organization. Yet, there are also a few employees within the service lines who have external customer contact and additionally work on internal change projects.

3.4 Data Collection

Our main data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews with nine employees of our case organization Alpha as part of our primary data. Moreover, we used written documents as secondary data, which enabled us to draw conclusions about the organizational structure from another perspective. Following Styhre (2013), most of this data can be considered 'raw material', however subjective influences in interviews might affect the study and the data gathered needs to be presented clearly.

3.4.1 Access and Sample

For our access to a company, we contacted various PSFs and ultimately found a suitable organization for our research. After phone calls and emails with HR to clarify legal issues, we have agreed on complete anonymization of the company, interviewees, and projects. Our first contact was an internal change manager who accompanied the project we were considering. He then provided us with further insights into which other internal change managers would be valuable for our study based on their experience and expertise. Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019) refer to this type of sampling as 'snowball sampling', whereby researchers access further interviewees through an initial contact. The authors criticize that snowball sampling is not random. Therefore, we also selected additional change managers from other areas of the company who had no connection to the initial contact and can be considered as randomly selected.

In addition, we contacted several partners by email to request interviews. In advance, specific criteria, such as length of employment, gender, and departments, were defined by us to ensure a diversity of perspectives. This characteristic follows a 'puri purposive sampling' (Hood, 2007). When selecting the number of interviewees, our primary intention was to achieve a

balance between the interviewed change managers and partners to sufficiently analyze both sides. The total number of interviewees was based on Bryman and Bell's (2011) principle of 'theoretical saturation', meaning "[...] the point when emerging concepts have been fully explored, and no new theoretical insights are being generated" (p.719). Based on that, we initially contacted ten possible interviewees and received positive responses from seven. After conducting the first two interviews, we contacted another five, with a further two agreeing to be interviewed. The table in appendix A provides an overview of our chosen interviewees.

3.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

We chose the method of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions as it aligns with the tradition of symbolic interactionism: it allowed us to make sense of context and social situations and relate them to the interviewee's perspectives (Prasad, 2018). Particularly by focusing on 'how' questions in the interview, moving away from 'why' questions, we avoided speculation that would not have resulted in purposeful answers for our study (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews offered us flexibility for further questions in addition to pre-formulated questions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015), which allowed us a degree of sensitivity, particularly for the phenomenon of organizational politics. Based on our selected interview groups consisting of change managers and partners, we prepared two interview guides. Through examining both perspectives, we aimed to get detailed insights into the underlying organizational politics and structure. In addition to important initial information such as confidentiality and recording permission, the guides contained a brief introduction to our topic and were provided in advance as an orientation. The interview guide for the change managers contained 18 questions in broad categories to gain an overview of the company's structure, experience with change projects, and dealing with organizational politics. After an initial interview, we adjusted some categories to improve the flow of the interview. The interview guide for the partners was based on the first guide. It included 18 questions as well, focusing on the partners' role in the company and asking about their personal experiences and actions. The interview guides can be found in appendix B and C.

The interviews were scheduled for 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the time availability and length of individual responses. All interviewees' native language is German, and thus, the interviews were conducted in German, recorded, and after the transcription partly translated by

us. This allowed us to ensure that everyone could answer naturally and express themselves accurately to cover relevant aspects.

All interviews were completed via Zoom video call due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, we insisted that they always included the video function to get as close as possible to a face-to-face interview. During the interviews, which we conducted together, we decided to have a clear division of roles. While one had the task of solely observing the interviewee and taking notes of facial expressions and gestures as well as pauses or other emotions, the other took the leading role and conducted the interview. This allowed us and our respondents to have a clear focus on the questions. However, the observer could still ask follow-up questions that helped the overall understanding and thus rounded off the interview.

3.4.3 Document Analysis

In addition to our interviews, which provided our primary data, it was equally crucial for us to get a slightly more objective overview of the organization and create meaningful interview questions. This information was accessible to us as part of what Saunder, Lewis, and Thornhill (2015) call 'secondary data', which is often used in case studies. The authors distinguish between 'raw data', meaning data that has barely been processed, and 'compiled data', which may have already been pre-selected. In our analysis, we used both forms, but only written documentary materials. Access to our secondary data was facilitated by the organization's consent to use internal material. This allowed us to select the relevant information we required. Our raw data were intranet posts or project websites, internal news articles, or various organizational charts to understand the structure in more detail. For the compiled data, we used the results of the most recent quantitative employer survey of the organization. This provided us with a comprehensive picture of the overall perception in addition to the subjective interviews and allowed us to compare our interviewees' responses.

3.5 Data Analysis

The following subchapter outlines our data analysis and includes how our data was prepared, processed, structured, and analyzed after collection. Bryman and Bell (2011) describe that analyzing qualitative data is an iterative process that begins with the collection of the first data and proceeds as more data is added. We noticed this process during our study and used it throughout our analysis. In accordance with the authors' description, we followed the grounded theory in our data analysis, which integrates the tools of the sampling method mentioned earlier,

theoretical saturation, and coding of transcribed material. This iterative process includes formulating general research questions, the theoretical sampling with relevant respondents, and the data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The subsequent steps of grounded theory we did, based on Bryman and Bell (2011), were coding our data and matching it with existing concepts or identifying new ones, as well as finding categories through constant comparison up to our saturation point.

Additionally to the theoretical concepts, we had in mind, our coding process was a central aspect of our analysis, which in grounded theory is considered the first step for generating theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). These codes help separate, label, and organize data (Charmaz, 2006). During the process, we used the principle of categorical reduction, which involves prioritizing some categories over others to obtain a theoretically relevant and more interesting data set (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We followed this principle simultaneously with the manual transcription of our interviews. In addition, the clustering of interview content into different categories facilitated a structured evaluation for us. Based on Strauss and Corbin (1990), we did this by analyzing the 'what's' and 'how's' in open coding, also defined as breaking down and conceptualizing data. We then connected the different categories created using axial coding, which the authors explain as linking data to the context. As a final step, we applied selective coding to define 'core categories', which, according to the authors, formed our analysis framework and could be linked to existing literature. While coding, we realized it was helpful to do it as a team in order to challenge each other and deliver mature interpretations.

3.6 Reflections and Limitations of the Study

In this final subchapter, we highlight the implications of conducting reflexive research in the context of an interpretive approach and outline relevant limitations of our study.

3.6.1 Reflexivity

As Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) define, reflexivity generally consists of reflecting on yourself as a researcher to build a coherent analysis and has two characteristics: 'careful interpretation' and 'reflection'. In our role as researchers in interpretive research, subjective impressions have a powerful influence. Therefore, the authors argue, recognizing context and connections is essential to achieve better results, ensuring we do not immediately assume a reflection of reality when interpreting the data we collect. Furthermore, interview situations are not free of politics as there are different interests involved, like respondents using the interview

for their own political agenda (Alvesson, 2003). For these reasons, alongside our open-ended questions in the interviews, we also attempted to obtain this context by analyzing written documentary material, which may provide a different perspective than individual interviews.

In addition, existing theories need to be known for accurate interpretation (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). We secured these in advance through a detailed literature review to get an overview of the topics. Moreover, language is a crucial issue for interpretation, which is why we conducted the interviews in German. Even if this entails a slight influence in our translation, the interviews' context was more precise because of the native language. The second characteristic, reflection, as defined by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018), is about constantly reflecting during the interpretation. Again, we noticed our advantage of being two researchers. While we were able to conduct the interviews and select the material together, the analysis and coding took place separately in order to be able to question each other afterward.

3.6.2 Context-dependent Knowledge

A possible limitation might be our choice to conduct a case study. Flyvbjerg (2006), in particular, reveals a common misunderstanding and explains that the frequent assumption of this method only creating context-dependent knowledge instead of context-independent knowledge is wrong. He points out that practical (context-dependent) knowledge is considered less valuable than theoretical (context-independent) knowledge. This often leads to quantitative studies being perceived as more appropriate to generalize knowledge. Even though we agree that we may not be able to make general statements with nine interviewees and our selected data material, we recognize Flyvbjerg's (2006) finding of uncovering in-depth expertise in particular areas through the qualitative way of questioning and reflecting. Therefore, we consider the synergy of context-dependent and context-independent knowledge, achieved through our pre-acquired theoretical knowledge and subsequent data collection, as a way to contradict this criticism. Additionally, we see our qualitative research's advantage to obtain more profound knowledge and perspective for the complex phenomenon of organizational politics in a specific organizational structure.

3.6.3 Trustworthiness and Authenticity

To improve the quality of our study, we focused on various criteria that define qualitative research. While in quantitative research, reliability and validity are often discussed, some authors question the suitability of these for qualitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Kirk &

Miller, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, the two primary criteria, trustworthiness and authenticity, emerged, which are particularly popular in interpretative studies and follow quantitative research criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bryman and Bell (2011) specify that trustworthiness consists of four criteria: credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity). In the following, we describe how we worked with these primary and secondary criteria in our study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that to achieve credibility, it involves demonstrating how credible the results are. There are various techniques, for example, 'respondent validation', whereby researchers present their findings to the individuals on whom they have conducted their research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). We were able to fulfill this criterion by providing our interviewees with the transcripts after an initial revision. Apart from minor verbal modifications, all interviewees agreed with the results and gave us permission to use them in our analysis.

For the criterion of transferability, which is concerned with the question of whether findings apply to other contexts as well, we have focused on the 'thick description' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While Bryman and Bell (2011) illustrate that this can be provided mainly through many cultural details, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that it is a detailed description of what others require to understand the situation and decide on its transferability. We addressed this criterion by describing our case and the implications of the organizational structure in detail. In addition, we explicitly asked our interviewees to what extent this phenomenon, at least according to their understanding and experience, also occurs in other contexts.

Bryman and Bell (2011) advise that appropriate documentation should be available at all research stages to increase our study's dependability. We tried to meet this criterion as best as possible by documenting everything from initial contacts via email, interview requests, interview guides, field notes, recordings, transcriptions, and coding process to be available in case access was requested.

The final point of trustworthiness, conformability, focuses on the researchers' objectivity, namely the degree of influence of their values or subjective opinions during the interpretative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). While we are aware that subjective influences cannot be eliminated entirely from interpretations, we tried to meet this criterion by providing detailed descriptions and conducting research as a team. Since we did not always work together

physically but sometimes separated, we revised each other's work and thus hope to have achieved the most reflective results possible.

The second dimension besides trustworthiness, as already mentioned, is authenticity, which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), entails a further set of criteria. For our context, the factor of fairness is critical, meaning to what extent does the research represent different viewpoints of the members of a social setting (Bryman & Bell, 2011). With our decision to interview not only change managers about their political experiences in cultural change but to also include the partners who frame the organizational structure and add other perspectives, we consider this criterion to be mostly fulfilled. However, we are aware that other members of the organization might contribute to this context as well. Nevertheless, we felt it was sufficient to start with these two groups due to our study's scope and focus.

3.6.4 Subjectivity and Biases

Another influential factor, already briefly mentioned above in the section on conformability, is subjectivity. Subjectivity is a common critique of qualitative research, which mainly arises from researchers' personal impressions and opinions in their analyses and interpretations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To counteract this, we have tried to adopt the principle of reflexivity as mentioned in 3.6.1 in order to prevent what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) describe as bias. Additionally, we benefited from our awareness of being political actors in the interview as well. Besides, using more objective data based on our documentary material analysis helped us take a less subjective view of the situation.

Within the framework of source-criticism, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) explain that in addition to the researchers, the interviewees can be influenced and alter the research through their subjective opinions by withholding information. Even though we cannot guarantee this was not the case in our study, it helped us to keep the focus on subjectivity and bias in mind during our interviews and in the analysis. By selecting our interviewees, where we tried to maximize diversity, we also felt it was essential to select interviewees ourselves where possible to minimize bias from one key person in the firm.

3.6.5 Data Collection during Covid-19

As a general constraint of our study, which may have had implications for the limitations mentioned above as well, we would like to address the circumstances of the global Covid-19

pandemic. At the time of our thesis, we had already been in this new reality for over a year, which for all of us consisted almost entirely of work-from-home, contact restrictions, and video meetings with sometimes difficult internet connection. These influences may have therefore affected our data collection. On the one hand, it was sometimes challenging to find interviewees who were willing to conduct interviews with us or kept to agreed times, as it was apparent that many interviewees had significantly less time available due to the consequences of the pandemic. On the other hand, the change to remote work, including fewer personal contacts, may have influenced our interviewees' impressions, especially on organizational politics. Due to the video call, it was not possible for us to see the other person entirely, and the internet connection sometimes caused facial expressions to be difficult to identify for us.

4 Empirical Findings and Analysis

In the process of our interviews and document analysis, we discovered three themes with subsections based on an organizational, individual, and action level. Even though we found these levels to be interconnected, we feel it is necessary to portray them rather separately from each other. This distinction facilitates a comprehensible overview of our empirical material. Accordingly, the first theme focuses on the organizational level, describing the underlying organizational structure and perceptions of a current silo mentality that manifests in various settings. The second theme highlights the identified interests of our case organization Alpha and its partners on an individual level that emerged in the course of the analysis. Lastly, we address the action level and present determined techniques that are used in the company to succeed.

4.1 Status Quo: Silo Mentality

The first theme revolves around the metaphor of a silo. In its conventional way, silos are huge stores for grain or other materials and often side by side but sealed from each other. Speaking of silos from an organizational perspective, our interviewees used this metaphor to describe the separation of services, partners, and other topics at Alpha. The theme is divided into three subsections, firstly exploring the outlines and opinions of the internal organizational structure under 'Working across Services is difficult'. In the subsection 'Collaboration is Necessary...isn't it?', we focus on the current perceived collaboration. With the third section, 'The Partners and their Small Kingdoms', we reinforce the assumption of silo-like ways of thinking and working.

4.1.1 Working across Services is difficult

An analysis of Alpha's company history provided essential information for an underlying understanding of the organizational structure. With its roots in the early 18th century, the company was a merger of audit firms from multiple countries. To this day, the company operates through a broad network of several national entities, each with different service areas and many partners. This fact, we interpret, can be attributed to its history of networking from early on. The primary purpose of this network is described on Alpha's intranet:

"Our organizational and management structure is consistently aligned with the value chain of our customers. The focus on our customers and the requirements of

the market are just as important as the interlinked collaboration of all segments, regions, and services." – Intranet Alpha

Most of our interviewees responded to the question to give a simple overview of the structure by explaining many details, which we will come back to within the chapter later on. Grace, a partner, provided an initial understanding, describing the influence of Alpha's first service: Audit. This service originated in the company's history and serves as a guiding factor for the structure of the organization:

"[The service] Audit, I think, very much shapes the corporate structure, which certainly limits the freedom of the individual services to some extent, compared to a mere consulting firm." – Grace, Partner

Her response reflected that the firm's structure is unlike that of traditional consultancies as the service Audit asks for a different approach than, for instance, the services Consulting or Deal Advisory. Nevertheless, since the company was initially a pure Audit firm, this particular service still has a major influence on the organizational structure. Moreover, her statement revealed the restriction of freedom of other services, which indicates a possible limitation of the partners' autonomy, as they are closely connected to their services. This statement was supported by the change manager Olivia, whose understanding is that *"there are individual partner teams that used to be very independent, but now the connection is a lot closer and much more top-down driven."* From our impression throughout the interview, her reference to the past was not directed to the period before the project but to a general and structural shift that the organization had undergone.

In addition to a general description of the structure, Philip, another partner, outlined the struggle for independence of the services as well:

"We have several structures in place. We are organized according to services, such as Audit, Tax, Law, Consulting, and so on. If it were up to me, I wouldn't need these services [for my business] at all because they are sometimes silos, as they are not quite as functional. We've newly incorporated management by sector [i.e., public sector, automotive industry, consumer goods], which I think is the step in absolutely the right direction as we are getting closer and closer to the clients and their needs. [...] Still, I believe that the services are very influential at the moment because there is also a very strong self-will in the services themselves." – Philip, Partner

He described the structure firstly by its division into services but limited the functional usefulness immediately through his evaluation and description of silos. As we heard the definition of a silo structure in seven of our interviews, it appears as if our interviewees take that for granted in the company. Ben, a change manager, even described "*silo thinking*" to be anchored in the organization while indicating that services and partners within these act mostly independently. This assumption was confirmed by Jack's answer as well:

"In our organization, everyone is working very individually. On the one hand, I think it makes sense to divide it [the structure] into services from a product and customer perspective. On the other hand, we always try to work across services, which is difficult for us within the services. Personally, I think we need to introduce a much stronger matrix view here. We currently have many different views, e.g., the service view or the regional view [...] and a new sector view. [...] If you ask me now whether it can be done better: Yes, I think the individual views should be more balanced because currently, the service view is very dominant." – Jack, Partner

His statement implied that employees are used to working separately. We understand this as a consequence of the company structure, which is dividing partner-led services and service lines. Furthermore, Jack addressed Philip's previously outlined conflict of forming a unified organizational structure by describing many views that are held in the company to explain the structure. While Alpha had already tried to overcome established service perspectives by adding the sector view, Jack also reinforced that mainly the service perspective is still embedded in people's minds.

Adjusting the organizational structures appears to be part of the strategy, according to the board's intranet article:

"We have already achieved a lot to expand our market position: we are growing profitably and sustainably. We have streamlined structures, clearly systematized our service portfolio, and invested in differentiation from the competition. We will consistently continue along this path." – Spokesman of the Executive Board

By stating that structures have already been streamlined, the Executive Board seemed to expect that the views described by Jack have thus been optimized. However, Lisa, a change manager, concluded her assessment of the structure as follows:

"We sometimes make our lives extra difficult because we have so many levels of control: 'Why don't you talk to the sector head again, why don't you talk to the Executive Board for X and Y again'. Well, the number of Executive Boards we have, it's crazy! We treat ourselves to a very complex - and from my point of view - also very expensive structure and process organization here." – Lisa, Change Manager

Combining this statement with organizational charts, we understood that Alpha has the main Executive Board on top of the organization and additional chairpersons, e.g., CHROs for every service. The insight Lisa gave us illustrated the challenge of delegating responsibility and control to not only act in a top-down way, as characterized before by Olivia but give flexibility to the services with their own chairpersons as well. Yet, according to Lisa, this seemed to have resulted in a chaos of control levels. The fact that our interviewees mentioned multiple views on the structures reveals that the customer market is not easy to map, but the organization tries its best to improve them. Furthermore, it arises that some partners perceive the current structure as limiting their freedom due to the significance of the service Audit.

4.1.2 Collaboration is Necessary...isn't it?

As suggested in the previous subsection, our interviewees had the widespread perception that so-called silos exist within the company. Therefore, to counteract these, the project OneAlpha was introduced. This project consists of several initiatives that aim to promote cross-service collaboration. One particular initiative of the project, which intends to implement mandatory rotations of employees, is presented on Alpha's intranet page as follows:

"Within our project OneAlpha, we see rotations as an important part of our employees' development, as it enables them to learn about new topics, understand our business better, recognize contexts and build networks. [...] This is how we want to improve interfaces in our business model and sustainably achieve the use of new knowledge in the Rotee's home service line." – Intranet Alpha

According to the company, the initiative follows the project OneAlpha. As stated in the intranet information, the primary goal is employee development. Yet, our interviewees mainly addressed the networking and thus collaboration aspect to improve the business. We further explored our interviewee's perceptions of the project and asked what they think about OneAlpha. Their opinions were rather diverse. The answers ranged from passionate advocates, like Olivia, who instantly exclaimed, *"I live it, yes I live it, and I still believe in it!"*, to

interviewees who see the necessity of the project, to those like Ben, who described the project and its vision as a "castle in the air". Particularly noticeable for us was the different response behavior of change managers and partners. While the change managers answered rather emotionally, the partners generally reacted neutral and spoke of necessary steps.

"Yes, we certainly must do [the project]. So, I am absolutely convinced that every network outperforms individual fighters, that's how it is. If we really get the network activated, it works much better than if we all run around individually. In that respect, it must work." – Jack, Partner

Jack highlighted two issues in his response. On the one hand, he confirmed through his word choice of "must" that the project is necessary, although it is probably not yet clear to him that it will be successful. On the other hand, he again picked up a certain silo mentality as he considered the project an opportunity to work more as part of a network than as a "lone fighter". For us, the use of the word "fighter" symbolizes the attitude that seems to prevail and thus the importance of cultural change that the project supports. Philip shared a similar perspective:

"I think it is absolutely necessary. With a piece-by-piece dissolution of services, that's how we become OneAlpha. Because what the customer really needs is a 360-degree view of his problem, and we do that with this theme-oriented approach [...] I am a man of conviction. [What we don't need is] just the small business owner in the company who then says 'But I won't give away my contacts because I don't want that, later on, someone will take something away from me'." – Philip, Partner

Philip's assessment validated our assumption that the project is primarily seen by some of our interviewees as something necessary. He confirmed the statement communicated by the firm by recognizing the added value for the client and the business. Furthermore, with his short example about taking away contacts and business, he gave us a symbolic insight into the fear that partners might feel about sharing and subsequently losing revenue; an outcome the implemented project with increased collaboration might have.

George's perception of the project partly confirmed Philip's opinion. Moreover, he addressed cultural differences that exist between the services.

"I think the project with its vision is quite good. But I'm aware that my Consulting colleagues, for example, have a slightly different set-up, they have a slightly different culture. [...] but yes, then I ask a colleague from Consulting, and we share

the project. And that also works. Then the revenue goes to Consulting, but the main thing is that we win the project in the end." – George, Partner

Nevertheless, George seems to operate entirely within the collaboration paradigm and confirmed that sharing clients works. Again, he referred to silos in a certain way, saying that the revenue will be allocated to Consulting, which means away from his service area, Financial Services.

In contrast to the partners, the reaction of the change managers when asked about the project was more diverse. We attribute this to two factors: firstly, the change managers work very hard to implement the project with its various initiatives. Therefore, frustration or enthusiasm could be linked to their personal experiences in the course of the implementation, which they have recently encountered. Secondly, they see the actual launch of the project from another perspective, as they have to conduct regular evaluations on its success. One example of the various comments we have heard from the change managers is by Lisa.

"OneAlpha is simply a buzzword. [...] if the project is realistic, I have no idea. [...] they [the partners] actually see themselves first as accountants or lawyers and only then as part of Alpha. The disadvantage is that they first take the benefits of belonging to Alpha but are not prepared to fulfill their duties in this respect. The thing is, no one believes in OneAlpha, but I think it is, in general, a very appropriate and necessary vision, and it needs to come from somewhere." – Lisa, Change Manager

Her description of the project as a *"buzzword"* may be an indicator that it is not taken very seriously yet is frequently mentioned, and the idea is realistic but somehow outworn as well. Based on the partners' previous statements, we do not see her claim that no one believes in it confirmed. However, Lisa also reflected the project's necessity, even if her statement *"it needs to come from somewhere"* seemed to have a rather annoyed undertone. The way she separated the partners by simply saying *"they"* supports our assumption that the gaps between individual partners are also regarded as silos by the change managers. In addition, she pointed out that identification with the company and fulfillment of duties comes second. An issue we interpret indicates that company-wide cooperation is less important than personal interests.

Contrary to the partners' explanations, Ben described his perception of the project as follows:

"Whenever we talk about OneAlpha, or the word occurs somewhere, there is laughter, or it is somewhat made fun of. [...] it's not necessarily that it has a bad image, but it's not perceived as relevant." – Ben, Change Manager

While the partners talked about the relevance of the project, Ben observed the opposite from his experience. For this reason, the question arises why there is a clear divergence in the statements of partners and change managers. One possible reason could be that the partners told us what was expected of them and thus did not share their honest opinion, or they were honest but still wanted to protect their autonomy. Furthermore, it could be an example of political dynamics as we were two interviewers from a university asking about an official change project. Accordingly, the partners' answers might not have been their true thoughts. Even though they were aware that the answers would be anonymous, they might have wanted to appear appreciative of the project. Another reason for the disparity in statements could be that Ben happened to have a bad experience with other partners simply by chance. Nevertheless, we also heard different opinions of the project from change managers such as Oscar's:

"I believe that the project with its vision is more realistic than ever [...]. I definitely see a very positive trend, also, because of staff rotations. The employees are an important leverage, and the Executive Board recognized it and argued, 'okay, the employees want this, we have to make this possible, otherwise we won't have any more employees'. [...] and there is much more tracking, rewarding and sanctioning. If you [the partners] don't deliver your workload targets, but at the same time you hoard your staff and don't make them available for others - you used to be able to do that safely and without punishment as a partner, but nowadays you get a slap on the wrist." – Oscar, Change Manager

In Oscar's explanations, we see various indications. On the one hand, he reported about changes in the project as well, giving it more relevance to reality. In addition, he introduced the staff interests that Alpha has targeted as a goal of the project. His explanation that the Executive Board tries to empower projects by using the crowd of employees suggests that this seems to be an effective way to counteract the partners' power and enforce projects. Furthermore, his descriptions indicate that the power of the partners is not infinite and that they are partly forced to cooperate; something that is more strictly controlled now.

Based on the initiatives already in place and the planned overarching project OneAlpha, it seems evident to Alpha's management that collaboration needs to be strengthened.

Nevertheless, in the interviews, we detected different perspectives. On the one hand, those who experience the collaboration to be strong already, but who are still convinced that OneAlpha is needed. In this case, we ask ourselves why the project with its primary goal of collaboration is considered necessary, if it is already working well, according to the partners. On the other hand, we heard voices that noted the need for collaboration but who were ambivalent about the project either not being successful or, conversely, perceiving it as working positively.

4.1.3 The Partners and their Small Kingdoms

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the organization is based on a partnership structure that comprises several service units. The resulting combination of silos and partners responsible for specific areas is referred to as "*small kingdoms*" by a few of our interviewed change managers. Oscar clarified this understanding by stating that "*the structure always has something to do with 'this is my small kingdom' and 'I try not to let others interfere'.*". The behavior Oscar observed was partly confirmed in the results of Alpha's annual quantitative staff survey. The survey consisted of several questions grouped into categories and explored, among other topics, the partner behavior, covering the entire company. An exemplary question in this category was: "*Do our partners embody our values in their daily behavior and actions?*" with Alpha's values including 'excellence', 'courage', and 'together'. According to the employees' evaluations, the category of partner behavior ranked lower than other categories and declined compared to last year's survey. Although about 50% expressed a positive opinion on it, there were still 30% who considered it neutral and 20% who felt it was negative. Alpha highlighted this as a weakness in the overview of results and announced it as an area for action. This could be another indicator that the partners' attitude is not perceived as a strength throughout the organization. An assumption that Oscar and other change managers reaffirmed in their mentioning of the "*small kingdoms*".

These "*small kingdoms*" can lead to the situation that projects are not implemented smoothly. Particularly in the case of the project OneAlpha, where entity and collaboration were supposed to be achieved, the services were a challenge, as Ben described from his experience: "*the statement 'But that's different in our service, that's why we don't do that' is something you hear regularly.*". Paula attempted to provide an explanation for these comments:

"[the introduction of the project] is complicated because there are simply different characteristics or needs in the individual services. They have different operating

models and different time models. They are actually small companies in a large organization that have been merged, and some are not even similar in terms of content. [...] it usually ends up that we break down service-wide topics in the individual services." – Paula, Change Manager

Her description of companies within the company, as we understand it, echoes the silo mentality articulated throughout the interviews. When it comes to implementing the project, it implies that much effort and customization are necessary to please everyone's business needs. She reinforced this aspect when she said that *"the implementation fails at the moment when no service-specific adaptations could or may be made."*

Jack summarized the differences between the individual services from a partner's point of view as follows:

"Our services function very differently. Consulting, Audit, or Tax have a completely opposite way of doing things than Deal Advisory. There are always overlaps, but there are also many things that differ. You have to address this and not standardize everything that can be standardized. At the same time, leave everything individual that needs to be individual." – Jack, Partner

Like the change managers, Jack emphasized the difference between the services and pointed out that individuality plays a significant role.

Although our interviewees confirmed that it typically depends on the project one is looking at, Ben affirmed that it is also essential to consider *"how big the pain is!"*. We understand this as another reference to the symbolic meaning of the partners' *"small kingdoms"*, which they are not willing to give up. Paula took up the term as well when we asked her how she perceives the project OneAlpha and whether she would consider it realistic:

"NO!! [laughs] No, not a bit. I think it's a nice buzzword. I think the underlying things are super logical [...], but I think we just have too many small kingdoms. It's just too much of everybody doing his [sic] own thing. Even if I believe the vision behind it has been understood and is meaningful. But to date, the implementation of that just hasn't been achieved, not even to a small extent." – Paula, Change Manager

The way she reacted to the question, laughing and rolling her eyes, almost reveals a negative attitude towards the project and a lack of seriousness regarding its vision. Her reaction was surprising for us, considering that she is a change manager working to implement the project where one could assume she would support the company's strategy. Even though she said that in her opinion, the vision and the purpose of the project are understood, the distinct culture of "*small kingdoms*" seems to be too strong to integrate it sustainably.

Subsequently, we asked our interviewees how the partnership structure is perceived regarding the implementation of the project. As Philip pointed out, decisions and related communications on all projects are "*very much cascaded [...] via the service head, the solution line heads to the other partners and finally the managers and the rest.*". The cascading effect that Philip described indicates the distinct hierarchy, even within the partnership. Ben recognized the partners primarily in their role as shareholders, explaining that the structure offers no other option than allowing the partners the freedom to make decisions.

"I don't think it can be done any other way because the partners are the ones who are responsible for the capital, and we are an economically managed organization, so you cannot transfer the responsibility for the implementation of these projects to any other level. Consequently, they would need to push the project as well. You cannot make decisions if you are not responsible for the capital - if you are not responsible for ensuring that your staff's workload is achieved in the next year." –

Ben, Change Manager

In his statement, he addressed mainly the responsibility that rests on the partners to take care of the business and their employees' workload. In addition to the "*territorial fights*" between the "*small kingdoms*" depicted by Oscar, we see in Ben's answer the need for the partners to commit themselves to projects that help the company overall. However, using the subjunctive shows us that this may not always be the case. It again supports the perception of "*small kingdoms*" in which partners tend to look after themselves and their business first before considering the bigger picture.

During the interviews, the call for comprehensive stakeholder management was recurrently mentioned by the partners. George clarified, "*There are very different responsibilities that a clear hierarchy cannot define. If you want to achieve something, it requires very advanced stakeholder management.*". Grace supported this statement:

"It also shows that at the end of the day, in a partnership structure, you can't implement anything against the partners' will, nothing. If you don't engage the partners and they don't see the need for change, or you can't explain it to them, and it doesn't resonate with their idea of OneAlpha and at the same time with their personal business case [longer pause], then it is immensely difficult. And I'm not talking about renitent personalities, which of course exist everywhere. In the end, we are only a mirror of society, even in a partnership." – Grace, Partner

Grace outlined the relevance of stakeholder management in the change process by expressing the importance of engaging the partners. Additionally, she emphasized the significance of personal concerns in the project by mentioning the business cases and pausing for a while during her answer. Furthermore, she pointed out that it is not even about particular opponents but about every single partner who may feel threatened if anything is withdrawn from them or if projects, strategies, or visions do not contribute to their personal business case. Oscar relativized these initial impressions by saying:

"At least in the past, partners were very much focused on their own business and less on the overall picture of Alpha. At the moment, I am experiencing a development that enables and creates greater cooperation. Actually, the demands of the Executive Board are increasing." – Oscar, Change Manager

His comment acknowledged that partners are concerned about their business, but it seems that there has also been a change, which originates primarily from the Executive Board. From the context of the interview, we could gather that the current project contributes to this change. However, other elements, such as adjustments in target agreements, encourage more collaboration and are explained in the following subchapter.

4.2 Underlying Interests and related Implications

Our second theme revolves around interests, firstly from Alpha's perspective and secondly from the perspective of individuals. Therefore, the first subsection is 'Alpha's Interests - Incentives for Success', as Alpha attempts to encourage its employees to achieve higher profits and, thus, more success for the company through target agreements as part of the incentive system. In contrast, partners and change managers pursue their personal aims. They, therefore, tend to care about themselves, their personal achievements, and their own careers and hence, neglect

Alpha's success as a whole, which is presented in the second subsection, 'Individuals' Interests - Focus on Personal Advantages'.

4.2.1 Alpha's Interests - Incentives for Success

The document analysis revealed that the partners at Alpha have equity stakes in the company. We interviewed the change managers whether this particular structure influences internal change processes. Olivia perceived internal change projects as a long-term investment for Alpha's success. Although partners and change managers agreed on the importance of internal change processes, the projects often fail. Paula described, from her perspective, why the projects were not successful.

"I wouldn't say it's necessarily because the focus is on external clients. In my eyes, it is a capacity issue, which is definitely a hindrance. [...] The company is very, very revenue-driven. The focus is really on making money, making money, making money - which is logical because the partners are also shareholders at the same time. During internal change projects, this capacity problem and this prioritization problem go hand in hand with saying 'actually I have to earn money now' and, on the other hand, spending time pushing the company forward internally. That is a big, big clash." – Paula, Change Manager

The fact that Paula repeated her words "very" and "making money" indicates that she wanted to emphasize how much the company values success and thus, puts a lot of effort into making profits. Paula's statement exhibits the pressure and strain partners are exposed to. Although the partners have a very high and powerful position in the company, they are still controlled by specific organizational structures in the company. Olivia shared a similar opinion and reported the following:

"Through controlling and steering, they [the partners] don't have that much power anymore, I think. One control mechanism is target agreements. If massive interventions or incentives have to be set through internal change projects, this is mostly controlled through the target agreements." – Olivia, Change Manager

As already mentioned in the first theme, the collaboration between the services has improved significantly in recent years, according to the interviewees. This highlights a power shift, as partners used to have a lot of say, but nowadays, Alpha claimed the position of power through

target agreements. The fact that partners no longer hold an undisputed position of power was evident in Oscar's statement about the incentive system as well:

"The biggest trigger is obviously the variable compensation package. Alpha consciously wants to dangle a carrot as big as possible in front of the partners' noses so that they acquire as much business as possible." – Oscar, Change Manager

This statement demonstrated that the target agreements should contribute to the overall success of Alpha, and hence, the partners should focus on revenue, i.e., on external business. However, this agreement is not compatible with the approach of implementing internal change processes. To still drive the internal change projects, Alpha has come up with a possible solution. Paula explained it in this way:

"There are some partners who, on the one hand, have turnover targets for their areas, but on the other hand, also have internal developments in their target agreements. Thus, too many topics are carried out simultaneously with a high demand for quality - externally and internally. And if a customer needs something, the internal projects are neglected. Consequently, colleagues don't consider internal change as important as they do not have the time to get involved." – Paula, Change Manager

Paula pointed out the dilemma with target agreements since, on the one hand, the partners are supposed to generate profit. On the other hand, they also have to take care of internal change projects, which should contribute to the company's success in the long run. The fact that partners cannot focus on both at the same time leads to a conflict of interest, which could have undesirable implications. Paula continued to tell us:

"It is about doing what is best for the entire company. Let's assume I was a partner: if the profit was not attributed to me but two of my partner colleagues, it would still be really great because Alpha earned more than if I had done it alone. However, this contradicts the turnover target, which states that I, as a partner, for instance, have to make 1.6 million euros in the next year, which is very challenging. Even if I have already reached my goal, I still wouldn't give any profit away." – Paula, Change Manager

We interpret this problem of partners pursuing their goals without regard for other colleagues or Alpha as organizational politics. The fact that partners prefer to miss out on profits that would benefit the whole organization and instead focus on themselves and their gross margins in the first place reflects their strategic and political actions. Ben had a similar assessment but called for attention as, in his eyes, organizational politics is not only about own goals but corporate intentions as well:

"During a change project, I certainly think that you consider the project itself as your personal interest. Consequently, you always act and argue for the success of the project. [...] I think many people behave politically and are not aware of it. They do what they have to do to push the project. Just like myself, I also want the project to be successful; otherwise, I'll get in trouble." – Ben, Change Manager

As he said this, he started to laugh. After a short pause, he added, as if he was caught, *"But it's probably politics, and it's probably not right"*. This statement reveals the influence of target agreements on the partners' and change managers' behavior. Therefore, political activities are seemingly being promoted through the individual target agreements within the company. We interpret the fact that Ben started laughing at his statement that he perceives organizational politics as a completely regular and daily routine. But when he realized that he is politicking as well, he felt caught. We understand his behavior as an indicator for him being used to political games but wanting to distance himself from them. A moment before, he was talking about the fact that many people are not aware of their political behavior, and at that very moment, he realized that he is one of them.

Paula also referred to the pressure of the target agreements and pointed out that they conflict with the vision of the project: *"That is precisely the absurdity with the target agreements and the sales pressure that each partner has, which of course, completely contradicts this OneAlpha idea."* To counteract the contradiction between personal target agreements and desired internal change projects, Ben had the following idea:

"My starting point would be to see how we can adapt the incentive system. In my eyes, a good solution would be to create a team incentive at all levels, with the effect that structures automatically play a less important role because the focus is different. It is then no longer about doing well individually but about doing well

with everyone. But this requires changes at the mindset level." – Ben, Change Manager

We notice that the partners are caught between two chairs due to given structures and framework conditions. Based on their target agreements, they pursue individual interests to achieve their goals. Besides, they are also shareholders and have the success of the entire company as a priority. Nevertheless, internal change processes, which contribute to success in the long term, are neglected due to lack of time and external mandates, which contradicts their shareholder position. Therefore, further agreements were made to shift the focus from individual revenue targets to internal change processes, which still leaves a gap in interests. The change managers offered a possible solution and proposed reorganizing the entire incentive system to move the emphasis from individual goals to team objectives. According to the change managers, this would minimize organizational politics as well.

4.2.2 Individuals' Interests - Focus on Personal Advantages

Ben said in his interview that a change of the individual mindset has to take place to fundamentally change the incentive system and finally overcome the contradiction of the target agreements. Nonetheless, he could tell from experience that the mindset of individuals is not easy to change. He referred to an internal change project that illustrates how difficult it is to change someone's attitude, as everyone is afraid of being neglected.

"In the integration project, resistance came from all levels, but especially from partners, even from a service head [a partner highest in the hierarchy and with additional responsibilities]. When I investigated why he had concerns about the project, it was evident that the problem could be summarized with the question, 'what will happen to me?'" – Ben, Change Manager

In his eyes, Ben had to experience resistance because change managers did not engage the partners properly, and thus, the partners' alignment was missing. The lack of alignment created a chain reaction that caused refusal and then cascaded further into politicking. George could relate to that kind of situation and clarified: *"for me, it is quite clear that passive resistance is probably the most efficient variant against change to prevent things, and I also observe that every day. I do that too."*

This reveals that personal interests are essential to George and many other partners. If he or his colleagues do not like a change, they resist. According to Oscar, it is typical political behavior because, in his eyes, *"politics means representing individual, very personal interests."* The partners' reaction to our question of whether they are politically active within the organization was apparent. George replied: *"Of course everyone has particular interests; we are individual business owners"* and Jack reacted as follows: *"I always try to avoid political games; politics is not mine."* Yet, Jack smirked at his statement, so we believe that his answer was ironic and that he - just like George - is politically active to pursue his own goals.

We also asked Lisa about her perception of whether organizational politics exist in her change projects at Alpha and how they are typically expressed.

"We don't have anything like that [loud laughter]. Yes, there is politics on all levels – both on an individual and organizational level. Political activities take place daily between individuals and separate services. In the end, this often becomes a major issue when implementing change projects. For instance, to reach personal interests, partners don't invite individuals to important appointments. [...] The underlying root is often resistance to change processes. However, resistance not only has downsides but also provides transparency about the stakeholder group, i.e., who do I need to influence and where do I prefer to keep my hands off to implement the project successfully." – Lisa, Change Manager

The fact that Lisa began to laugh when we asked her about political activities and initially denied the question indicates that she - like Jack - is very ironic about the political occurrence and demonstrates that politicking is quite prominent at Alpha. Her statement reinforces that organizational politics is present *"on all levels"*. As her examples for politicking show, partners utilize either overt or hardly recognizable tactics that make it challenging to implement change processes. Nevertheless, we understand from her statement that not only partners are politicking to follow their objectives but also change managers. As Lisa pointed out, she knows exactly who to influence and how to approach the partners to implement the change process successfully. This proves her sensitivity and experience regarding organizational politics, on the one hand, but on the other hand, it reveals that Lisa is politically active too.

Yet, Lisa is not the only example of change managers acting politically. Oscar also shared an incident in which he became politically active:

"There is a wide range of what change managers and partners can do to pursue their goals. [...] Why did I do that? Because the other day he [sic] let me down too."

– Oscar, Change Manager

His statement shows that not only resistance to a change project leads to political action, but interpersonal structures play a significant role as well, according to the motto 'what goes around comes around'. This illustrates once again that individuals' interests are at the center of attention and that the effort is weighed against the benefit of each action. The following statement also highlights the fact that everyone is looking out for their own advantage:

"If partners realize that it [the change project] is favorable for them - not for the organization, the board or the service head, but for the partners themselves- if they gain benefits from the project, then they don't feel they have to be politically active. But if they feel threatened in any way - threatened sounds very extreme. Let's say if their personal interests are not protected, then they have to decide: do they fight or do they accept it? If they decide to fight, then they make a strategy for how they can achieve their interests." – Paula, Change Manager

In our opinion, *"making a strategy"* sounds a lot like making a plan and, thus, consciously deciding to become politically active. The aim is to oppose the change project and ultimately to assert one's interest or opinion. We can recognize the importance of own interests from Paula's statement. She explicitly pointed out that the focus is on oneself and not on Alpha or the Executive Board. Consequently, one only becomes politically active in her eyes if something does not comply with personal desires or needs. According to Grace, those desires are precisely the issue. She believes that many within the organization want to be involved in the decision-making process and attempt to impose their views. She stated:

"We are a purely academic society. You have a completely different resilience, which means you want to be asked; you want to have a say. These are the issues that contribute to the fact that not everyone is always enthusiastic when a third party says 'we're going to do a project'." – Grace, Partner

The fact that everyone in the organization wants to have a say leads us to conclude that Alpha decided to control partners' behavior or actions through target agreements. Grace continued, the reason for the usage of target agreements is *"because there are simply too many people working in the organization who have a certain level of say in decisions, so it is not always*

played fairly.". In this way, Alpha attempts to reduce the partners' sovereignty over decisions to balance the power triangle to some extent. Precisely this aspect that partners could exploit their power to stop change projects to achieve their personal interests was exemplified in Jack' following statement:

"There are career paths within the organization as well. If I get certain people out of the way, I might have the job available for myself. So, there are colleagues who act very politically and very consciously plan an internal career." – Jack, Partner

Career planning seems to play a significant role among the partners, as Olivia also talked about very ambitious and driven partners. Through the desire to climb the career ladder, partners develop competitive mindsets and tend to engage in political activities. Olivia described it as follows:

"Employees are very much prepared for growth, and we have people with very high career ambitions, especially at the partner level. I do believe that this is a trigger, of course. The organization is structured in such a way that you develop further, that you move, and I think that is a driver that you have to position yourself cleverly and act strategically in terms of organizational politics." – Olivia, Change Manager

Olivia's statement illustrates that the structure and the way the company is organized influence the employees' political activity. Considering Graces' following statement, we also notice that both partners and change managers are aware that they only reach their aims through politics. Grace told us: *"Myself, I am aware that I can control this [the change initiative] to a certain extent with my behavior."* When we asked her how she feels about the fact that she has the power to influence internal change processes in order to pursue her own interests, she replied: *"Whatever helps is good; otherwise, you won't get far in life."*

What helped George to *"get far in life"* became evident in his following explanation about acquisition points that partners receive when they help another partner to win a customer. In this process, the supporting partners do not receive any revenue, but only the points, which positively affect their overall target agreement.

"If you're in an environment like Financial Services, where we basically work well together, it's easier, because you just negotiate privately: 'Come on, give me your acquisition points, I'll give you mine so that we first achieve the given goal'. [...]"

Either you find a proper cooperation model, or you simply have to realize that we have the upper hand [...]. Then we just push this project away again, and we make the decisions among ourselves as before." – George, Partner

In his interview, we observed the partners' behavior resulting from the company's attempt to withdraw power from the partners through target agreements. George considered the partners to collaborate closely with each other by exchanging acquisition points and thus supporting each other. However, it is questionable whether this kind of collaboration is desired by Alpha or whether George and the other partners instead try to trick the system.

From the interviewees' responses, we conclude that politicking is taken for granted among partners and change managers. Even though some of them are not aware that they are behaving politically in certain situations, the majority is nevertheless conscious of their actions. Moreover, there is frequently the pressure to use politics to promote one's own interests, such as career ambitions.

4.3 The Art of Survival at Alpha

The third and final theme we have identified is the 'Art of Survival at Alpha'. With the project OneAlpha, the company puts a lot of emphasis on the employees' connectedness to work across services. However, it often happens that those connections are used for individual purposes as well. Therefore, coalitions and political alliances are established to promote personal interests, which are portrayed in the first subsection, 'Weaving Networks for a Strong Bond'. In addition, partners and change managers have to reposition themselves continuously; the goal is to find loyal and reliable supporters to carry out their objectives or change projects successfully. Consequently, the second subsection is about 'Betting on the Right Horse - Knowing Your Strategic Companions'.

4.3.1 Weaving Networks for a Strong Bond

As mentioned earlier, Alpha's project vision is to create a single entity and strengthen the collaboration between services to reduce the silo-like structure. Therefore, the partners must be well connected, know the expertise of each other to advise clients in the best possible way and thus, drive the company's success. George told us about these complicated interconnections that exist at Alpha:

"Alpha as an organization functions very strongly with networks and with coalitions. Simply because we have this complex matrix structure." – George, Partner

George's statement leads us to believe that the basic organizational concept of Alpha, which is the formation of networks, has been realized and thus provides a promising prerequisite for the project OneAlpha. Yet, George also used the word "*coalition*", which in our opinion does not sound like OneAlpha, but rather like a political and sometimes hidden agenda. Our thought is supported by Grace's statement, as she revealed the following:

"[Politics] is visible and invisible. I think the tactics I see most are the informal network approaches: We have these networks very, very much, and at the end of the day, you can only be successful if you know them and [...] are able to react to them." – Grace, Partner

We interpret Grace's statement about informal networks to reflect George's understanding of coalitions. Furthermore, she used words that we associate with politics. For example, she talked about '*tactics*' and '*approaches*' to pursue goals. In addition, she told us about politics being '*visible and invisible*', which we consider as her being very well informed about the topic. Moreover, her statement points out that partners, besides enhancing Alpha, exploit the networks to advance their own interests. In George's eyes, one has to position well and figure out how to proceed strategically to get the best results for oneself. He stated:

"But this topic [coalitions] brings us back to the cooperation model and perhaps politics when it comes to individual interests. Because yes, it is about the organization as a whole, but it is also about whether it makes sense for individuals to build coalitions and work as a team or whether it makes more sense to be a single-player and try to outplay everyone else." – George, Partner

His quote depicts the interplay between interests and collaboration, which leads to the formation of a coalition. Additionally, George's statement implies how highly politicized George is: he constantly evaluates what is best for him and either forms alliances or fights alone, depending on the situation. This leads us to conclude that George swims with the tide and is thus not entirely predictable. Another indication that he is volatile is the fact that George told us at the beginning of his interview about the importance of collaboration among partners to secure Alpha's success in the long run. However, with the previous statement, he diminished

his original comment about the need for collaboration and instead exposed that he does not always comply with it.

Grace recognized the impermeability of the network and the partners' behaviors as well. She explained:

"We have over 600 partners. For someone coming in externally, it is not transparent who has power or sovereignty to say something. And that is because almost all partners are in multiple matrices. It is extremely challenging to get into this web - especially for someone who is not used to the structure of a partnership organization. That's sometimes also the difficulty with us; if you ask yourself the question, why are there hardly any people here who are successful and come originally from the industry? Because they don't know such an informal hierarchy and don't know how to play with it." – Grace, Partner

Grace's statement proved that networks are prominent at Alpha with the consequence that employees who have not grown in the structure have little chance of being successful. This might also be the case if they have gained similar work experience outside of Alpha and provide the same qualifications. Furthermore, Grace chose the words *"to play with it"*. We associate these words with children who are juggling and tricking each other with a lack of seriousness. Nevertheless, behind the scenes, this innocent game is highly strategic and political. This leads us to conclude that partners experiment with whom they get along and explore how they can be most successful. The topic of playing a game was also addressed by Olivia, who said the following:

"Especially if you want to survive or get ahead with us - then you have to play the game. You have to decide for yourself how you defend and build your place in society as a whole." – Olivia, Change Manager

To be esteemed and valued at Alpha, we interpret that one has to *"play the game"*, i.e., strategically consider which tactics to use to promote and position oneself successfully. Therefore, only those who have positioning skills and devise smart strategies will be – literally speaking – ahead in the game. Grace pointed out:

"If you don't have emotional intelligence, but other strengths that you could use perfectly, you still won't be successful. Even if your strengths might be good for

Alpha, they still won't be used if partners who can play to their strengths in this kind of structure oppose you." – Grace, Partner

While networks are beneficial for partners, they can be just as helpful for change managers in the process of project implementations. Olivia shared the advantages with us:

"To notice resistance, you have to be well connected in society or the organization, as resistance is not always actively expressed verbally. Often partners say 'Yes, that's great' to their superiors even though they are not convinced of the change project. Thus, they trick you. [...] An outsider would never find out about resistance. Alpha's structure and networks have grown over the years, so if they want to play differently behind your back, you won't notice." – Olivia, Change Manager

Olivia's statement illustrated, on the one hand, the interwoven structure and, on the other, the resulting impermeability, which makes it challenging to sustain clarity. For this reason, it is difficult to notice who is supporting or opposing a change project and who has some agenda in the back of their mind. It also proves that both partners and change managers have to be socialized in this network or be part of a coalition to succeed and survive at Alpha.

4.3.2 Betting on the Right Horse - Knowing Your Strategic Companions

The previous part has demonstrated that networks, which are supposed to improve collaboration among partners, are used as a basis for alliances and coalitions to pursue their own interests. Oscar revealed how partners who had concerns about an internal change project took political action to force the change project to fail.

"Well, they [the partners] actually tried to convince individual partners - partners with influence. As an individual, you are often powerless, but you simply try to reach out to fellow supporters. Therefore, a small cell then sought out more influential advocates and thus, became bigger and bigger. At some point, the evolved group of partners persuaded a Consulting or Deal Advisory chairman to say, "No, that's not our solution, we need another one now." – Oscar, Change Manager

We associate the symbolic use of "growing out of a cell" and "getting bigger and bigger" with some kind of revolution or a wave that comes in and floods everything. Considering George's following statement, our view is partly correct because the goal is to convince as many partners

as possible of one's intention. Nevertheless, it is helpful to find certain key people to build a successful coalition; hence, a sophisticated strategy is needed. George stated:

"In our environment, you have to find out: who do I have to reach so that they [advocates] multiply as much as possible and capture others to get the most support? Those are not automatically the ones who are in a high hierarchical position." – George, Partner

George's statement exhibits that creating alliances is not necessarily about attracting the highest-ranking person, but rather partners with influence who can convince others and strongly represent their opinion. This quality of persuading others is critical to achieve personal interests or cause projects to fail. George continues:

"You can support change projects, criticize them openly or sabotage them; you can also do it passively and covertly. I then plan how I can hinder it [the change project]. I have to look at it as a whole and bring in the people I want to have with me because some have more influence and others have less power. I am constantly looking at who my friends or buddies are that I can rely on and where it makes sense to invest. After joint projects, I reflect on them and think very strategically about who to bring on board for the next project." – George, Partner

We immediately noticed George's choice of words: he used the words "power", "invest", and "reflect". All these words illustrate how strategic and tactical he is when working together and show, as previously outlined, how inconsistent George's actions and statements are. We understand that for George, networking functions like a business deal and, if the collaboration is successful, will be continued. The word "invest" clarified this symbol of the business deal because as soon as money comes into play, the situation gets severe. However, George also used the word "buddy" to reduce his statement's seriousness and bring a certain lightness into it. Again, the word fits in with the symbol of "playing the game" that we have already discussed. Nevertheless, George is not the only one to take such a tactical approach. The choice of coalition partners plays a significant role for Grace as well:

"So, you are constantly scanning: who are the stakeholders? Who are the particularly critical partners? Who are the influencers?" – Grace, Partner

The topic of influence and making the right choice in building their alliance is of great importance for partners. Yet, also change managers use this tactic to push through their goals, i.e., the successful implementation of a change project. Therefore, change managers seek the support of partners with influence. The aim is that influential partners convince their fellow partners who are resistant to the project to join them. Once the key people are determined, the change managers apply politics. Olivia reported:

"One can simply identify who the partners with strong opinions or influence are. Who has which particular interest? Who perhaps has reservations or resistance to the change project? With whom is it possible to have a side conversation, as there are also those partners who cannot or do not want to be politically active. In my eyes, it is crucial who your supporter is. You always need the support of important partners to assert your own interests. I think that's why organizational politics is definitely important." – Olivia, Change Manager

We understand Olivia's statement in a way that the greatest guarantee of success for both partners and change managers is to have the back-up of key players and, thus, to set the course for the change project. The change managers' knowledge about who has *"reservations or resistance to the change project"* discloses a form of sense-making as they attempt to understand the stakeholders' needs. Jack summed it up with a suitable metaphor, revealing once again, the symbolic role of social interactions:

"For this reason, you always have to decide which horse you bet on. It's always about where I find my alliances, who I support, and who I perhaps hinder. And that is based on one's own goals, a personal agenda or a power structure." – Jack, Partner

The answers expose how crucial it is to find suitable peers and coalition partners to *"survive"* in a structure such as Alphas. It is essential for partners and change managers that their alliance partners have the influence to voice their opinions and take others on board. Partners and change managers aim to support or hinder the right stakeholders to be able to turn the desirable screws. The ultimate goal is to advance their own interests.

4.4 Summary of Empirical Findings and Analysis

Throughout our analysis, we noticed that the way Alpha is organized has a significant impact on the overarching project OneAlpha. In particular, due to the partnership-based organizational structure, there is little collaboration across services, which can be traced back to the company's history. Although Alpha has already tried to establish more structural consistency, our interviewees still experience 'silos' - a strong separation into services and sectors. We identified the combination of the partnership structure and its resulting silos as a trigger for the emergence of political behavior. The partners' fear of losing autonomy over their teams and services was evident from what our interviewees portrayed as 'small kingdoms', resulting in an attempt to undermine OneAlpha. Thus, analyzing the organizational level, the partnership structure is hindering itself in introducing increased cross-service collaboration. Furthermore, Alpha seeks to achieve the greatest success and, therefore, encourages its partners to generate higher profits through target agreements and incentives. To accomplish these agreements, the partners focus on external clients. Yet, on an individual level, this leads to a conflict of interests between partners and change managers as internal change projects are being neglected. The result is partners resisting and, consequently, using organizational politics. Nevertheless, it is not only OneAlpha that creates organizational politics but also the personal goals of partners and change managers. While partners fight to climb the career ladder or achieve their target agreements, change managers are committed to ensure that their change initiatives are implemented successfully. With the project OneAlpha, the organization emphasizes cross-service collaboration and thus, appreciates networks among employees. However, looking at the action level, individuals also regularly draw on these networks to build coalitions, which are ultimately used to achieve their own objectives through politicking. Surprisingly, the partners do not really commit to the cross-service collaboration that OneAlpha demands but do collaborate within their coalitions. The difference we identified is that partners can choose who they want to work within their coalitions instead of being assigned to particular teams. Hence, the partners aim to gain supporters to be able to fight against unpopular issues. Moreover, due to Alpha's history, the networks are complex and tangled, making it difficult to keep track of who the key players are. Therefore, it is essential for both change managers and partners to receive the necessary support from the influential key persons to pursue their personal goals strategically.

5 Discussion

The following chapter discusses our analysis and empirical findings to provide a clearer picture and deeper understanding of our research by comparing it with our reviewed literature. In our empirical data, the interviewees referred to a specific overarching change project, namely OneAlpha, intending to increase collaboration. Considering this change, the interviewees shared their understanding of the underlying organizational structure and organizational politics emerging from it. We divided the chapter into four sections to answer our research questions of how a partnership structure in a Professional Service Firm (PSF) triggers political action and what the effect of a partnership structure for collaboration within PSFs is.

5.1 The Clash of Organizational and Individual Demands

We begin our discussion by examining our empirical findings to understand the underlying demands. In the literature, Neuberger (2006) presents organizational politics as an everyday occurrence, while Buchanan and Badham (2008) argue that particular contexts give rise to politicking. According to our empirical findings, organizational and individual triggers underlie organizational politics.

5.1.1 Setting the Stage for Politics

Before addressing the individual triggers that underlie an emergence of organizational politics, it is necessary to acknowledge the specific organizational factors that have an equally significant influence (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). Our empirical data indicates that specific formal organizational structures are prevalent at Alpha. These include the different services with their service lines as well as sectors and regional structures. Similar to Kaiser and Ringlsetter's (2010) research, the multiple structures are perceived as an organization's attempt to diversify further to cover corresponding market demands. Particularly the descriptions of Greenwood et al. (2010), who characterize a multiplex organizational form with the subdivision according to geographical location, service line, and industry specialization, were confirmed by our findings. In addition, Alpha is organized as a partnership, which further increases multiplexity. However, Greenwood et al. (2010) do not exactly depict the causes of this complex structure. In our empirical findings, the interviewees mentioned many reporting lines in the organization, making it complex to understand and navigate within the structure.

The literature implies the strong hierarchy consisting of partner, manager, and consultant offers a clear orientation in partnership-based PSFs (Jehle, 2007; Maister, 1982). Even though some of our interviewees also described a strong hierarchy, they still mentioned many reporting lines and an additional hierarchy at the partner level. These statements indicated that it is not quite as simplistic in the case of Alpha. Maister (1982) further argues that his aforementioned three-part hierarchy supports a clear career path which employees follow. From our perspective, the career path provides an organizational trigger according to an 'up or out' principle to push career ambitions and performance.

As part of the organizational factors, we consider the specificity of PSFs and the extent to which they stand out from other forms of organization as well. Core characteristics that are reflected in the literature were also confirmed in our findings. One example is interaction (Løwendahl, 2005), which is the basis of the firm's main business and takes place externally with clients and internally between employees. Another characteristic described by Løwendahl (2005) is that services are provided with the highest norm of conduct, putting the customer's needs above the company's profit. However, the analysis of our findings does not support and even contradicts his research; in several interviews, the importance for growth and market coverage became evident, aiming to acquire as many clients as possible, to increase profit. In our view, this can be partially attributed to Alpha's partnership-based organization.

One of the fundamental factors, which we classify as another organizational trigger, is the company's incentive system. In our study, which mainly focuses on the partners, most respondents mentioned the target agreement as an underlying trigger that causes frustration. From an organizational point of view, the firm uses the target agreements to maximize profit and maintain power over partners. Thereby, a variety of elements, such as collaboration, are incorporated into it. In this context, we heard the example of acquisition points, which aim to ensure that partners help others acquiring new clients and not just focus on themselves and their business. The organization's interests to achieve more profits through collaboration are passed on to the partners by using target agreements. Moreover, the ongoing project OneAlpha benefits from the details of these target agreements. The details include overarching project goals, such as cooperation, that are now controlled via a certain number of sales points each partner needs to earn to meet defined targets. The concept of target agreements is in line with the basic approach described by Maister (1982), who points out that partners have targets for the workload of their teams and need to ensure that they are met.

Altogether, the identified factors set the stage for organizational politics and correspond to what Buchanan and Badham (2008) refer to as determinants for change complexity. In Alpha's case, the hampered integration of various structures and, in addition, the partners' unique role in the company increase the complexity of the change. Although the partners hold the position at the top of the hierarchy with a shareholder status, the organization tries to control their power through strict target agreements. Furthermore, the company aims to achieve more collaboration through various initiatives to gain a competitive advantage. Yet, collaboration contradicts the partners' autonomy, resulting in a particular complexity for the change to turn the firm into a unity, namely OneAlpha.

5.1.2 The Actors' Personal Triggers

In addition to organizational components, there are personal factors to consider in the emergence of organizational politics as well (Fairholm, 2009). Besides other organizational participants, who can certainly play a role in various situations, we concentrate on our two interviewed groups, namely change managers and partners, as they are the main focus of our study.

As explained in the section above, the partners' position represents the highest level of the career ladder in a partnership organization and defines a clear career path (Maister, 1982). According to one partner's statement, Alpha has specific career paths. These paths lead to individual partners wishing to climb further up the partner hierarchy and using political means to achieve this goal. A change manager confirmed those career ambitions and reported the partner's extensive drive regarding their career development, which she referred to as a trigger. Therefore, our empirical findings demonstrate how relevant career planning is in the organization in general, but especially for the high level of partners who have already achieved their status in the firm through ambition and still strive to expand it or at least maintain it.

The second individual trigger we recognized, not only from an organizational point of view but also from the individual point of view of the partners, was the target agreements. While the organization utilizes them to generate more profit, for the partners, it is all about meeting the set targets and receiving the corresponding bonuses. The degree of profit interest was visible in the interviews by comments stating even if targets were already achieved, the profit would not be given to others, according to the philosophy 'more is more'. Furthermore, the comments revealed how some partners focus only on themselves and their agenda while disregarding

colleagues. This finding is partially in line with Luthans, Rosenkrantz, and Hennessey (1985), who identified the correlation between the success of seniors and the use of politics. The authors broadly refer to senior professionals, which for instance, include managers. Nonetheless, the focus of our study was specifically on the position of partners, who represent the top level of the career ladder. Consequently, our empirical findings indicate that the more interested partners are in their success and thus achieve their targets, the more politically active they become.

Contrary to this, we see the partners' comments about collaboration. As Gardner and Valentine (2014) recognize, few partners work together and are generally skeptical about how teamwork would help them personally. Based on our interviews, we cannot arrive at this conclusion. Instead, our interviewed partners stated that they do collaborate and consider it necessary, putting aside their personal goals. If we compare these statements to the previous paragraph, we notice two inconsistent aspects of interest: on the one hand, there is a desire to increase profits and meet personal goals, which aligns with the literature. On the other hand, partners are convinced of OneAlpha and the vision to introduce cross-functional cooperation, which, based on our analysis, means that profits should be shared with other partners. According to the interviewed partners, they seem to put their personal interests aside to improve the company's overall performance and present the best solutions to the customer. However, change managers told us differently, who stated that partners still see themselves too much in their role as a small business owner and less as part of a big picture.

In addition to the partners discussed above, the change managers with their individual triggers also contribute to the situation. Their daily work is the planning, execution, and implementation of the project. Accordingly, the success of it is crucial for them, as it facilitates or hinders their work and, last but not least, has an impact on their careers, as they are the experts who were entrusted with it. The statements about the project we heard in our interviews were diverse, especially from the change managers. While one confirmed to us the project's success is her personal interest, from others, we rather had the impression that they were distancing themselves from it because they did not consider visions of the project to be realistic. Nevertheless, linked to the personal career goals, we believe that the individual trigger for the change managers is a successful implementation of the project.

The personal triggers presented correspond to what Buchanan (2008) describes in his A-B-C model. Yet, they differ from our point of view in one respect: the author defines the personal

factors in the context of organizational politics as being "necessary evil" (p.58). Even though we see our listed factors as triggers for the subsequent politicking, the interviewees interpreted them as rather natural and relatively neutral circumstances when interacting in organizations.

5.2 The Strategy behind Politicking

Our empirical data indicate that there are multiple variations of politicking. As part of their strategies, some of our interviewees stated they aim to influence other partners to convince them of their opinion or project ultimately. Several scholars (e.g., Bozeman et al. 2001; Buchanan, 2008) agree and claim that many stakeholders widely use influencing tactics in organizations to assert both their own and organizational intentions. Moreover, according to Kipnis and Schmidt (1982 cited in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), political actions are conducted through "informal social influence tactics" (p.16). Our interviewees, however, emphasized it is not about persuading any partner of their intention but primarily about attracting the ones with a significant influence.

Furthermore, the interviewees shared the opinion that the hierarchical position is of little importance in determining how much influence and, thus, power they have. On the one hand, the finding confirms Fairholm's (2009) claim that all employees, irrespective of their hierarchical position, are politically active. On the other hand, it validates Buchanan's (2008) study outcome that it is very common to associate with influential stakeholders and use them as key players to support their own initiatives. Pfeffer (1992) argues similarly when he points out that power is exerted to influence others and to steer a project in the desired direction. The importance of owning and exercising power was also clearly evident in the statements of our interviewees. For instance, one change manager told us that she knew exactly whom to strategically influence to deliver her change project successfully. In addition, a partner stated that the key to success is to convince influential, and thus, powerful partners of his intentions to become a more effective entity.

The tactic of influencing others to support their own agendas or projects leads to coalitions within the company. As mentioned in the literature review, Romm and Plisking (1997) are aware that alliances are created to act as a reinforced unit against others' intentions or implement a change initiative successfully. Buchanan's (2008) study outcome uncovers that it is a widespread tactic to build strong coalitions in organizational politics as well. In our empirical findings, we can determine a similar picture based on the statements of our interviewees.

Additionally, we reveal the sophisticated strategy behind the formation of coalitions that one partner indicated. He described how he assesses and evaluates the worth of particular coalition partners with the goal to pursue own interests.

As already outlined in the literature review, social interactions and relationships play a significant role in companies with informal structures. Accordingly, Hunter, Bentzen, and Taug (2020) found out that social interaction with colleagues creates a network. In particular, PSFs thrive for networks within the company, as these provide the basis for effective collaboration among colleagues and ultimately form a 'one-firm' firm (Maister, 1993). Greenwood et al. (2010) confirm this idea and are convinced that this can prevent silo formation within the organization. Alpha also has a large network among its partners, which is encouraged as such and intended to serve cross-service collaboration and thus, to realize OneAlpha. However, from the interviewees' statements, we learned that this network is often used to pursue one's own interests instead. Mintzberg (1973) notices that managers prefer to focus on creating advantageous networks rather than performing their actual tasks. According to Buchanan (2020), creating a network with valuable contacts is applied very frequently in practice. One partner referred to informal networking as the most common tactic utilized at Alpha to achieve personal objectives and ultimately be successful in our interviews. Another partner also outlined the need to position oneself strategically within the network to maximize performance. This was supported by a change manager as well, who pointed out that the only way to survive or progress in Alpha is to find a place within the network and defend it. The reason given was that Alpha has many partners who are strongly interconnected through several matrices. Consequently, the network is not straightforward and, thus, difficult to enter.

5.3 Resulting Effects - A Matter of Perspective

The third part of our discussion focuses on the organizational and individual outcomes arising from the previously outlined demands and strategic actions. Our empirical material suggests a torn organizational and individual perspective, resulting in consequences for the overall organization.

5.3.1 Organizational Tactics for Success

As discussed in the first subchapter, our empirical findings at the organizational level indicate that Alpha combines a partnership structure with different services and sectors. Specifically,

according to most of our interviewees, the division of partners into service lines leads to so-called silos. Greenwood et al. (2010) address the risk of silo-building, stating that an organization needs to support the formation of networks to prevent such silos. For example, the authors recommend overlapping communities of separate service lines, which would subsequently result in networking. Although networks exist to some extent at Alpha, they operate within services and not across services, according to the general understanding of our interviewees.

Another origin for the emergence of silos is that too much specialization leads to the formation of sub-units, which require specific mechanisms to keep them integrated (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2010). In our interviews, we discovered that there is already a mechanism in use to counteract the silo mentality, which is the rotation program. According to our empirical material, the program is part of the overarching project OneAlpha, which aims to break down silos and foster collaboration across existing boundaries. Still, mechanisms like the program are not always accepted by all partners out of fear of experiencing personal disadvantages such as loss of staff. The corresponding behavioral reactions, therefore, lead to politicking to prevent personal disadvantages. As an outcome, political tactics by opponents can influence the implementation of the project Drory and Romm (1990). In our case study, we additionally see the change's success being threatened and leading to a dysfunctional effect from an organizational perspective.

Furthermore, our empirical data suggest that Alpha has been able to mitigate political behavior through adjusted target agreements of the partners. We see this adaptation as a result of a large-scale structural shift from the company to limit the partners' autonomy and facilitate the introduction of projects. This was confirmed by the change managers, who reported that Alpha has already successfully introduced initiatives to improve things from an organizational and change perspective. In the literature, target agreements are frequently described as leverage to achieve long-term success for the firm. Maister (1982), for instance, points out that workload targets have to be fulfilled by partners. To our knowledge, target agreements are not mentioned in the literature to be a tool that limits political behavior; a practice that emerged in our empirical findings.

5.3.2 Struggling for Individual Power

In addition to the existing silos at the organizational level, described in the previous section, we identify further consequences at the personal level. The interviewed change managers indicated that there is a lack of collaboration amongst partners. This in line with our empirical material that displays the following reasons for missing teamwork: firstly, the interplay of personal interests related to the partners as shareholders; secondly, strict targets and, thirdly, a project vision that is considered necessary but does not seem practicable in the daily business. Those reasons confirm studies researching collaboration in partnership-led companies (Briscoe & Tsai, 2011; Gardner & Valentine, 2014). Yet, the change managers' statements were contrary to the partners' perception of their collaboration. According to the partners, they do work with others. Nevertheless, during the interviews, it became evident that the willingness to collaborate decreases as soon as profits can no longer be allocated to their own service area. This finding demonstrates the partners' focus on their personal goals, which goes hand in hand with achieving the target agreements. Only if there is alignment with the 'personal business case' are they willing to collaborate across services, as one partner shared.

Moreover, our empirical findings reveal that several partners did not perceive specific changes as necessary. Through behavior such as ignoring or blocking initiatives, it seemed to be possible for partners to gain enough power in the company to stop some projects or prevent their successful implementation. Here, a certain power dynamic is exposed, which is also mentioned by Pfeffer (1992). He explains the relationship between politics and power as being able to influence others and, more importantly, to change the direction of projects. While the partners struggle for their individual power, Alpha attempts to counteract powerful partners through mechanisms such as target agreements and incentives.

With the help of adjusted target agreements, the organization aims to achieve behavior that corresponds to the organization's overall goals, including a successful implementation of OneAlpha. These countermeasures have been validated by the change managers and represent a shift in power structures in the organization. Consequently, the target agreements allow less self-interest of the partners. While we have already discussed the prominence of these interests, we also acknowledge the importance of individuality for partners. The call for individuality was raised when the interviewees explained how different the services with their partners are. However, greater organizational control over partners through target agreements limits their freedom in being autonomous and individual. As a consequence, they fear losing power over

their mentioned 'small kingdoms'. The adaptation of the target agreements symbolizes a change in the formal organizational structure and results in more 'formal power' (Weissenberger & Teufel, 2011). This power was expressed in our empirical findings through explanations about the Executive Board, increasing its demands on the partners. Here, we partly disagree with von Nordenflycht (2010), who stated that the distinct power structures at the high level of the partners are hard to control as in our case, Alpha found its way through adjusted target agreements.

5.4 Moderating Mechanisms for Handling Politics

Our interviewees provided indications that we would classify as moderating factors or mechanisms for handling organizational politics throughout the conversations. The following subchapter describes what we see as promising approaches, based on our empirical data, to address the organizational and individual triggers for politicking already in the early stages to minimize the effects.

Our empirical findings reveal an increased call for stakeholder management, which is a common tool, especially in change management, to monitor the success of projects (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). In particular, the classification of critical employees as part of a stakeholder analysis helps to ensure that they are appropriately addressed with suitable measures along the implementation process and remain in focus. Mainly the interviewed partners mentioned that they would like to get a far more pronounced stakeholder management at Alpha, as they do not feel adequately covered on many topics. Moreover, giving them guidance would make it easier for them to change. We recognize that the partners think of themselves as individual business owners who want to have a say in the process. The desire for participation relates to what Alvesson and Robertson (2006) found in their analysis of professionals in PSFs and called 'elitist'. In our case, the partners feel they belong to a special group and wish to be treated accordingly. According to our interviewed partners, for the change managers, this provides an important tool that is not yet being used sufficiently. Yet, it could control the political behavior in change projects already from the beginning.

The second approach is based on the statements of the change managers, who understood they were also acting politically in the project's implementation process. Some authors describe this political interaction as sense-making, whereby change managers communicate a shared meaning to those affected by the change and thus help them understand the benefits of the

change (Kulikowska-Pawlak, 2018; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). The possibility of facilitating change processes through sense-making can be seen as a follow-up to the previous description of stakeholder management. In our conversations with our interviewees, we perceived an additional need for 'intuition' or 'sensitivity' when practicing sense-making in the context of organizational politics. It is mainly through empathy in interacting with those affected and the change managers' knowledge of when and how to become politically active, reducing triggers and harmful politicking.

Furthermore, our empirical data indicate that politicking occurs at all levels, confirming Vigoda-Gadot and Drory's (2006) finding. The authors claim that everyone in the organization acts politically. Therefore, as a moderating mechanism, we suggest creating more political awareness and embedding it in the organization's culture. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, in our process of identifying suitable interviewees and the project framework, it was not easy to find a setting that the organization was comfortable with. The reason for this, we were told, was that they feared drawing too much attention to negative aspects of the projects or even threatening initiatives in their implementation through conducting interviews on organizational politics. Even though some of our interviewees were very open in their comments about politics, we see this as a clear sign that existing politics in the company are not handled openly enough. This perception is confirmed by Lientz and Rea (2004), who state that everyone in an organization is aware of politics, even though it is not explicitly discussed but rather seen as a "hidden agenda" (p.42). More political awareness by openly addressing it during change processes with all stakeholders could lead to the prevention of 'dysfunctional consequences' as Buchanan and Badham (2008) call it.

6 Conclusion

In the following, we will draw upon our identified main findings to address our research questions. In addition, we will outline the theoretical contribution that we have obtained through our study. Moreover, we will give suggestions for future research and finally conclude with practical implications.

6.1 Empirical Findings

The empirical findings of our study have revealed that connections between organizational structure and organizational politics can be located at all levels, namely organizational, individual, and action. Thus, as part of our main findings, the following two paragraphs predominantly answer research question 1) *How does a partnership structure in Professional Service Firms trigger political action?* Primarily finding three and four provide explanations for research question 2) *What is the effect of a partnership structure on collaboration in Professional Service Firms?* Our fifth finding presents implications that can have a preventive effect on politicking.

Our first finding demonstrates a strong separation of services in the organizational structure and is experienced as silos by our interviewees. Thus, a certain silo mentality hinders cross-service collaboration and leads to the partners working mainly within their services. Our interviewees provided several reasons for the appearance of this silo-like structure. Firstly, they explained that Alpha has a complex structure in general, as it has an Executive Board and additional chairmen resulting in various reporting lines for the employees. This is a finding that was confirmed by our document analysis as well. Secondly, according to our interviewees, the existing multiplex structure impedes transparency, hindering cross-service collaboration. Thirdly, the fact that partners are also shareholders and thus comparable with small business owners enhances their mindset to work individually, always taking care of their own 'small kingdoms'. Consequently, the perception of a significant division of services is the trigger for silos. As a result, partners focus on themselves and their services and do not operate within OneAlpha's vision. Thus, indirect opposition to the project and politicking were experienced.

The second main finding we have discovered is the formation of networks and coalitions. As mentioned earlier, OneAlpha intends to improve cross-service collaboration and, for this reason, the organization appreciates networks. Nevertheless, the networks are exploited by

partners for their own purposes to secure personal success and to follow their own agenda. Consequently, networking provides the opportunity to build coalitions with influential partners. To form a feasible alliance, partners constantly reflect on who is useful to achieve goals ultimately and is worth allying with. Therefore, the partners evaluate who to invest time and energy in to profit from this coalition. According to our interviewees, it is all about positioning oneself strategically in the organization and realizing one's own objectives. Through building allied groups, political behavior is demonstrated.

Our third finding identified the challenge the partners' role poses for collaboration in a PSF. Due to the shareholder role of the partners, they often act like numerous small business owners in a large company. From an organizational perspective, the shareholder position aims to contribute to the entire organization's success as partners are interested in the firm's long-term existence. Hence, they are expected to increase profits and support improvements in the interest of the company. In this context, a one-firm model like OneAlpha is often used to strengthen the competitive advantage through increased collaboration within the firm. However, it is challenging to increase collaboration because, from an individual perspective, partners tend to be rather 'lone fighters' and consider themselves as autonomous individuals instead of team members. Therefore, personal interests such as career ambitions and positioning through politicking within the company predominate.

Our fourth finding uncovered that an incentive system with its target agreements creates a conflict at the partner level in PSFs. Even though this system increases the firm's control over the partners and overall profits, the partners manage to find gaps in the target agreements that provide opportunities to trick the system and maintain their own position of power. In addition, the partners receive individual payouts by fulfilling the target agreements. Therefore, they concentrate primarily on their external business rather than investing time in internal change projects that do not generate direct revenue for partners. This results in a clash because target agreements are mainly linked to achieving the maximum profit instead of internal improvements like OneAlpha. Consequently, it leads to a neglect of collaboration that sometimes includes profit sharing and implies that target agreements cannot be achieved as quickly. Although there is an attempt to anchor internal collaboration in the incentive structure, it does not appear to be mature enough.

The fifth and final finding we discovered is the moderating mechanisms for handling politics. These mechanisms are intended to assist organizations, and their change managers in

addressing some of the identified triggers to mitigate politicking and undesirable outcomes. Our empirical findings reinforced these moderators from both a partner and change manager perspective. In particular, the interviewees indicated a need for enhanced stakeholder management and recognized the necessity for sensitivity in managing change processes. In addition, when dealing with politics in the company, we are convinced that a change of mindset can reduce the disadvantages of political behavior in its origins. Thus, creating an extended political awareness is one of the moderating factors that our study has revealed.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

In the literature review, we have explained the specific organizational structures of PSFs. In PSFs, the literature describes the occurrence of many individual structures that lead to multiplexity (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2010; Morris, Greenwood & Fairclough, 2010) and are often partnership-based (Greenwood et al. 2010). Furthermore, we have elaborated that networks, for instance, are part of the informal organizational structure (Hunter, 2015; Krackhardt, 1994; McEvily, Soda & Tortoriello, 2014). In the context of organizational politics, these networks are utilized to build coalitions (Mintzberg, 1973). According to Giddens (1984), organizational structure and organizational politics are two concepts that are mutually dependent and permanently interrelated. Still, in some cases, further connections between the concepts of organizational structure and organizational politics in the context of PSFs are not sufficiently clarified in the literature (e.g., Gardner, 2015; Klimkeit, 2013). Due to the sensitivity of organizational politics, there is only a limited number of studies in this field (e.g., Kulikowska-Pawlak, 2018; Rogers et al., 2020; Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006).

In addition to strengthening previous research, we also contribute to the field of research. In the context of the organizational structures of PSFs, our study has identified reasons for the complex structures described by Greenwood et al. (2010). The authors address that multiplexity occurs in PSFs due to many services, sectors, or geographical locations. Our empirical material has further discovered that complexity arises primarily in combination with partnership structures triggered by multiple reporting lines. Although the literature suggests that different services and sectors can lead to silos (Greenwood et al. 2006; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2010), in our study, the reason for these silos emerged from the partnership structure. As a consequence, partnership silos impede organization-wide collaboration.

Furthermore, Maister (1982) mentions the importance of partners fulfilling workload agreements, thereby linking organizational structure to target agreements. However, the literature does not note the mechanism we discovered to control political behavior and increase cross-organizational collaboration through target agreements in PSFs. The fact that partners do not like to cooperate is reinforced by Gardner and Valentine's study (2014). Our empirical data emphasized their findings and demonstrated that skepticism among partners arises, especially when they have to split profits due to shared customer projects; consequently threatening their target agreements. Besides, Luthans, Rosenkrantz, and Hennessey (1985) suggest that the link between success and politicking is common among senior professionals. Our study revealed further that this connection is particularly true for partners who have a unique role due to their simultaneous shareholder position.

In conclusion, our study showed mechanisms that can mitigate the undesirable consequences of political behavior in the early stages. These mechanisms include a combination of stakeholder management, sense-making, and the creation of political awareness to experience organizational politics less as a "hidden agenda" (Lientz & Rea, 2004, p. 42).

To summarize, our four key theoretical contributions are listed below.

- Our study has identified reasons for the complex structures in PSFs, namely the combination of a partnership structure and additional multiplex structures (service, sector, etc.) triggered by multiple reporting lines.
- Organizational silos emerge from a partnership structure due to partners' desired autonomy, individuality, and a strong sense of ownership.
- Target agreements are established as a tool to control political behavior and increase collaboration.
- According to our study, the mechanisms of stakeholder management, sense-making, and the creation of political awareness can reduce unwanted consequences of politicking.

6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As we have chosen a qualitative approach for our study, we had the advantage of gaining a deeper insight into the subject matter and thus obtaining detailed answers from the

interviewees. However, as this thesis was designed in the form of a one-case study focusing on a particular PSF, we would suggest further research in other industries.

Moreover, due to time constraints, we could only collect limited written documents and conduct a small number of interviews. Therefore, we suggest future research to interview on the one hand the highest level, the Executive Board, that represents Alpha. Thereby, Alpha's specific interests and the vision behind OneAlpha concerning the incentive system of the partners could be analyzed. On the other hand, it would also be interesting to ask the managers subordinated to the partners how they perceive organizational politics in the context of organizational structure. At this level, both partners' and employees' interests collide, so that managers are often caught between two chairs.

In addition, we propose to expand the study further. Our interviews have shown that the incentive system with its target agreements is a significant trigger for political actions at Alpha, as partners are controlled and steered through it. Additionally, it would be important to identify if there are other components of the incentive system besides the target agreements that cause political action and especially how they contribute to it.

Furthermore, our study addressed the specific context of the overarching change project and, thus, collaboration. For future research, we recommend examining politicking within other areas to discover whether the change project makes a difference to the political actions within the organization. A more extensive study would be needed to explore this, as it would have exceeded the timeframe of our thesis.

6.4 Practical Implications

We believe that our findings also add value in a practical context, especially for managerial implications. During our study, we learned that organizational politics is a term that has no clear definition, both in theory and in practice.

"Organizational politics? That's a good question. To be honest, I don't know the term as such. Can you give me a definition?" – George, Partner

Statements like these demonstrated that the term is undefined and rarely used, although all had a similar perception of the topic and were able to list examples. This was evident in the literature as well, where various terms are used to describe organizational politics. Yet, no clear

distinction has been made so far. Therefore, we suggest establishing a clarification and defining what constitutes organizational politics from an organizational perspective. In this way, we believe political awareness can be created. There are already many defined frameworks in companies, such as competence models or defined values, which should be acted upon. For a topic that is treated mostly as a "hidden agenda" (Lientz & Rea, 2004, p.42) and yet is so widespread, it would be advisable to approach it openly, create a mission statement and thus acknowledge it. As soon as organizational politics is no longer an unaddressed subject and not only the disadvantages are anchored in people's minds, it will be possible to highlight and benefit from the advantages of organizational politics as well.

Consequently, through transparency, the right signals can be sent from the organizational side, and perhaps it even initiates a mindset change. If there is an open dialogue within the company, conflicts of interest can be addressed, such as the target agreements for partners, which we identified in our study. Currently, such agreements are not fully mature and tend to cause tricking the system. Being transparent and initiating a mindset change can ultimately get everyone on the same side, reduce politicking and make projects such as OneAlpha more realistic.

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Appendix

Appendix A - List of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Position	Length of Employment
Ben	male	Change Manager	9 Years
Olivia	female	Change Manager	12 Years
Oscar	male	Change Manager	8 Years
Paula	female	Change Manager	4 Years
Lisa	female	Change Manager	12 Years
George	male	Partner	20 Years
Grace	female	Partner	24 Years
Philip	male	Partner	15 Years
Jack	male	Partner	7 Years

Appendix B - Interview Guide Change Managers

[Please note: The interview guide has been translated from its original language, German. This could lead to some words not having the exact same meaning as in English]

Preface

[Please note: the preface was not read word by word but provided guidance when conducting small talk in order to help our interviewees be more natural and relaxed]

- We are two master's students at Lund University who are conducting interviews at Alpha to get a more detailed picture of the influence of organizational structures on organizational politics as part of the overarching project OneAlpha.
- We would like to ask or encourage you to answer the questions naturally and share your experiences with us, it is not meant to be an interrogation but a dialogue. There are no right or wrong answers.
- Our master thesis is completely anonymized, so that neither names, projects nor the company are included. In addition, the contents are protected by our confidentiality agreements with Alpha.
- Is it okay if we record the interview to be able to process answers more easily afterwards?
- Do you have any more questions or can we get started?

Existing Corporate Structure

1. How would you describe the corporate structure at Alpha in your own words?
2. How do you perceive the structure?
3. Partners at Alpha are also shareholders. How does that influence the change process from your point of view?

Change Project

4. The daily business of partners is rather concentrated on external clients. From your point of view, how does this influence the implementation of internal change projects?
5. What is your position on "OneAlpha"?
6. Would you say that the change project is easier to implement in some services than in others?

Resistance towards Change

7. Many change projects fail. Internal resistance is cited in the literature as a reason for this. How do you notice in practice that you encounter resistance?
8. Is it always clear who is for or against the change project?
9. What levels typically show the most resistance?
10. To what extent is resistance shown?
 - a. Do you have examples of this?

Organizational Politics

11. Organizational politics is often a dimension in change processes. First of all, what is organizational politics from your point of view?
12. Not everyone likes change or is convinced by projects. Nevertheless, do people at Alpha always "play fair"?
13. What tactics have you used yourself or observed in the partners' behavior?
14. Is organizational politics taken for granted in the company?
 - a. Does this create a certain compulsion to play along? (Even if you would like to refrain from doing so yourself).
15. Does organizational politics also exist in a positive form?
 - a. If so, can you give examples?
16. From a political point of view, what helps in the introduction of the change project?
17. Are there ways to prevent political tactics within the change project?

Further Comments

18. Are there any other points related to the topic of organizational structure and politics in the change process that we have not addressed?

Thank you very much for the interesting conversation and your time, we are now at the end of our interview. It was very exciting to hear what experiences you have had so far in the context of the transformation and how you are dealing with it.

Appendix C - Interview Guide Partners

[Please note: The interview guide has been translated from its original language, German. This could lead to some words not having the exact same meaning as in English]

Preface

[Please note: the preface was not read word by word but provided guidance when conducting small talk in order to help our interviewees be more natural and relaxed]

- We are two master's students at Lund University who are conducting interviews at Alpha to get a more detailed picture of the influence of organizational structures on organizational politics as part of the overarching project OneAlpha.
- We would like to ask or encourage you to answer the questions naturally and share your experiences with us, it is not meant to be an interrogation but a dialogue. There are no right or wrong answers.
- Our master thesis is completely anonymized, so that neither names, projects nor the company are included. In addition, the contents are protected by our confidentiality agreements with Alpha.
- Is it okay if we record the interview to be able to process answers more easily afterwards?
- Do you have any more questions or can we get started?

Existing Corporate Structure

1. How would you describe the corporate structure at Alpha in your own words?
2. How do you perceive the structure?
3. How are coordination processes at partner level organized in your service?
4. As a partner you are practically an owner in the company. Do you think this influences your approach and motivation in change processes?
 - a. In what way?

Change Project

5. We assume that your daily business is rather concentrated on external clients. How relevant are internal change projects for you?
6. What is your position on "OneAlpha"?
7. Would you say that there is a certain bias (positive/negative) towards internal change projects in your service?
 - a. Would this also influence your personal attitude?

Collaboration with Other Units

8. How does collaboration with partners within your service compare to collaboration across services?
9. How does communication look across services?

Resistance towards Change

10. Many change projects fail. Internal resistance is cited in the literature as a reason for this. Have you or your partner colleagues ever shown resistance?
11. How did you act in the process?

Organizational Politics

12. Organizational politics is often a dimension in change processes. First of all, what is organizational politics from your point of view?
13. Not everyone likes change or is convinced by projects. Nevertheless, do people at Alpha always "play fair"?
14. What tactics have you used yourself or observed from other partners?
15. Is organizational politics taken for granted in the company?
 - a. Does this create a certain compulsion to play along? (Even if you would like to refrain from doing so yourself).
16. Have you ever noticed that political tactics were also used by change managers in order to carry out a project successfully?
17. Do you think organizational politics also exist in a positive form?

Further Comments

18. Are there any other points related to the topic of organizational structure and politics in the change process that we have not addressed?

Thank you very much for the interesting conversation and your time, we are now at the end of our interview. It was very exciting to hear what experiences you have had so far in the context of the transformation and how you are dealing with it.