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**Managing Organizational Change:  
Context and Process of Successful Leader Sensegiving**

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## **Abstract**

In times of organizational change, a shared understanding of the change initiative facilitates positive attitudes and supportive behavior among employees, both crucial factors for the success of change. Leaders can create a common understanding by sharing their understanding of the change through sensegiving, the attempt to exert influence on employees' sensemaking towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality. Successful sensegiving is therefore a crucial leadership activity in times of organizational change that affects employees' sensemaking and fosters the creation of similar schemas among organizational members. Extant research has mainly provided insights into the actors and strategies of sensegiving, thus outlining the different types of sense-givers in organizations and the range of strategies they use. However, despite these important findings, two areas remain largely unexplored: the context and process of sensegiving. Therefore, this dissertation aims to investigate leader sensegiving from a context and process perspective.

The first study deepens our understanding of the context of leader sensegiving by showing how four moderators influence sensegiving at two different stages of this process. The relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving, which determines the content and intensity of leader sensegiving, is moderated by schema consistency on the organizational level and by the level of legitimate power on the individual level. The relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking, which determines the effectiveness of leader sensegiving, is moderated by schema consistency on the organizational level and employee emotions on the individual level.

The second study further examines the context of sensegiving by putting the focus on a specific sensegiving strategy, namely leader appeals to announce change initiatives.

Based on construal-level theory, the study tests the assumption that the effectiveness of leader appeals can be enhanced by creating fit between the content and the context of the message. Results provide first indications that the abstractness of the leader appeal, as expressed in the temporal distance to the change initiative, needs to be in line with the hierarchical distance between leader and employee in order to increase followers' perception of management support of a change initiative.

The third study shifts the focus toward the process of leader sensegiving and investigates how leader sensegiving takes different modes over the course of a change process to answer varying sensemaking needs of their followers. For each of the four phases of change (exploration, preparation, implementation, evaluation), this study identified dominant sensemaking needs (reassurance, orientation, balance, acknowledgment) that are responded to by leaders through respective sensegiving modes (receptive, participative, compensating, evaluative).

In sum, the results of this thesis emphasize the embeddedness of sensegiving in an organizational and social setting. Sensegiving is neither designed nor received in a contextual manner but rather influenced by the organization within which it occurs, by the relationships between its members and the members themselves, as well as by the change phase during which it is exerted. Thus, this dissertation offers suggestions for designing the sensegiving process in a way that fosters a shared understanding among organizational members and prepares the ground for successful organizational change.

**Kurzfassung (German abstract)**

In Zeiten organisationaler Veränderungen fördert ein gemeinsames Verständnis des Veränderungsprozesses die Entwicklung positiver Einstellungen und Verhaltensweisen von Mitarbeitern, was wiederum ausschlaggebend für den Erfolg von Veränderungsprojekten ist. Führungskräfte können die Entwicklung eines gemeinsamen Verständnisses unterstützen, indem sie durch Sensegiving ihre eigene Interpretation der Veränderung an ihre Mitarbeiter weitergeben und dadurch darauf Einfluss nehmen, wie Mitarbeiter durch Sensemaking die Organisationsrealität für sich neu definieren. Erfolgreiches Sensegiving stellt somit eine kritische Führungsaufgabe in Veränderungszeiten dar, da es die Entwicklung ähnlicher Schemata bei Organisationsmitgliedern fördert. Die bisherige Forschung lieferte bereits wichtige Erkenntnisse hinsichtlich der Akteure und Strategien von Sensegiving. Trotz dieser Einsichten sind zwei Forschungsbereiche bisher relativ unerforscht geblieben: der Kontext und der Prozess von Sensegiving. Aus diesem Grund zielt diese Dissertation darauf ab, Sensegiving von Führungskräften aus einer Kontext- und Prozess-Perspektive durch drei Studien zu untersuchen.

Die erste Studie vertieft unser Verständnis über den Kontext von Sensegiving, indem sie den Einfluss von vier Moderatoren auf zwei verschiedene Phasen des Sensegiving-Prozess aufzeigt. Einerseits untersucht die Studie die Beziehung zwischen dem Sensemaking und dem Sensegiving der Führungskraft, welche den Inhalt und die Intensität von Sensegiving bestimmt. Hier wird der Prozess auf der Organisationsebene von Schemakonsistenz und auf der Individualebene von legitimer Macht moderiert. Andererseits untersucht die Studie Moderatoren der Beziehung zwischen dem Sensegiving der Führungskraft und dem Sensemaking der Mitarbeiter, welche die Effektivität des Sensegivings bestimmt. Hier wird der Prozess auf der Organisationsebene von Schemakonsistenz und auf der Individualebene von Mitarbeiteremotionen moderiert.

Die zweite Studie untersucht den Kontext von Sensegiving, indem sie die Effektivität einer spezifischen Sensegiving-Strategie – die Ankündigung von Veränderungsinitiativen durch Führungskräfte – untersucht. Ausgehend von der Construal-Level-Theorie überprüft die Studie die Hypothese, dass die Effektivität dieser Strategie erhöht werden kann, indem eine Passung zwischen dem Inhalt und dem Kontext der Botschaft hergestellt wird. Die Ergebnisse liefern erste Indikationen dafür, dass der Grad der Abstraktheit der Kommunikation, ausgedrückt in temporaler Distanz zur Veränderung, mit der hierarchischen Distanz zwischen Führungskraft und Mitarbeiter übereinstimmen sollte, um die von den Mitarbeitern wahrgenommene Veränderungsunterstützung durch das Management zu erhöhen.

Die dritte Studie richtet den Fokus auf den Sensegiving-Prozess und untersucht, wie das Sensegiving von Führungskräften im Verlauf eines Veränderungsprozesses unterschiedliche Formen annimmt, um die verschiedenen Sensemaking-Bedürfnisse der Mitarbeiter zu befriedigen. Die Studie identifiziert für jede der vier Phasen einer Veränderung (Exploration, Vorbereitung, Implementierung, Evaluation) spezifische Sensemaking-Bedürfnisse von Mitarbeitern (Beruhigung, Orientierung, Ausgleich, Anerkennung). Auf diese Bedürfnisse kann die Führungskräfte mit entsprechenden Sensegiving-Formen reagieren (rezeptiv, partizipativ, kompensierend, evaluierend).

Insgesamt heben die Ergebnisse dieser Arbeit die Verankerung von Sensegiving im organisationalen und sozialen Kontext von Organisationen hervor. Sensegiving wird weder frei von Kontext gestaltet noch rezipiert, es wird vielmehr von unterschiedlichen Faktoren beeinflusst: die Organisation selbst, die Organisationsmitglieder und deren Beziehungen zueinander, sowie der Zeitpunkt, zu dem es stattfindet. Diese Dissertation formuliert Empfehlungen dafür, wie Sensegiving gestaltet werden kann, um ein gemeinsames Verständnis unter Organisationsmitgliedern zu fördern und damit die Basis für erfolgreiche Veränderungen zu legen.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation and Research Questions

”People don’t resist change. They resist being changed!” – *Peter Senge, 2006*

The ever increasing number of transformations (Petrou, Demerouti, & Häfner, 2013) has turned change into a “natural component of employees’ working lives” (Rodell & Colquitt, 2009, p. 989). Change describes the movement from a present to a future state (Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, & Hunt, 1998). In the organizational context, it comprises, for example, downsizing, restructuring, or a change in the strategic direction or in the organization’s identity (He & Baruch, 2009; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999). As opposed to incremental changes which only require minor modifications in organizational members’ belief systems (Bartunek & Moch, 1987), radical change initiatives place high demands on employees as existing belief systems no longer suffice to meet the new requirements (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Their unpredictability and non-linearity (Balogun & Johnson, 2005) often lead to feelings of ambiguity, confusion, and disorientation (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and eventually to unsupportive change behavior. However, employees are not per se resistant to change (Ford, Ford, & D’Amelio, 2008): Resistance is rather the result of deficient sensemaking (Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince, 2012), that is, the process of constructing meaning to develop a framework that allows one to create and understand the environment (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995).

In order to engage in adequate sensemaking activities, organizational members depend on the input from others (Louis, 1980), especially leaders (Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). The deliberate intent to influence the sensemaking of others in order to shape their understanding of the environment is called sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi,

1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2013). Due to the significance of leader sensegiving in shaping employees' attitude towards change, this process has received increased research interest over the past years (Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008; Humphreys, Ucbasaran, & Lockett, 2012; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Sharma & Good, 2013). Previous studies have mainly explored the who and the what of sensegiving: who the sensegiving actors are and what sensegiving strategies they use (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). However, considerable gaps in sensegiving research remain.

First, relatively little attention has been paid to the social context of sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). Sensemaking and sensegiving are often treated as context-free processes (Taylor & van Every, 2000), a fact that is especially striking as first studies in this field have already demonstrated the significance of social context for both processes. For example, Maitlis (2005) investigated how the characteristics and outcomes of employee sensemaking vary according to the intensity of leader and stakeholder sensegiving. However, factors on the individual and organizational level have been largely ignored in extant research although it has been recognized that "framing is enabled and constrained by both external and internal forces" (Foldy et al., 2008, p. 527). Due to the complexity and interrelatedness of organizational life (Hage, 1965), the effect of context factors on sensegiving cannot be disregarded without neglecting the role of the socio-cultural context (Rouleau, 2005) and individual factors (Vlaar, van Fenema, & Tiwari, 2008).

Second, our understanding of the effectiveness of specific sensegiving strategies is very limited. Previous research focused mainly on sensegiving strategies in general (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013) without paying explicit attention to the effectiveness of particular strategies. However, the multiplicity of sensegiving (Sonenshein, 2006) suggests a more detailed analysis of strategies in order to enrich our understanding of the construct as a whole. So far, our understanding of the factors influencing the effectiveness of sensegiving strategies

is very limited. As employees' readiness for change is "influenced simultaneously by the content [...], the process [...], the context [...], and the individuals" (Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris, 2007, p. 235), research should broaden its focus to investigate the content and context of particular strategies instead of only focusing on sensegiving strategies as a single entity without distinguishing between the different forms of sensegiving. For example, leader appeals, for example during the announcement of change initiatives, are considered a central part of leader sensegiving (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Martins, 2005). However, our knowledge of the content and context that increases its effectiveness in affecting employees' attitude towards change is very limited.

Third, the link between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking has received limited attention in organizational research so far. Although the interaction between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving is well established (Shamir, 2007), it is unclear how leaders allow best for employees' sensemaking needs over the course of a change process. Previous research has shown that relevant information reduces employees' resistance to change (Oreg, 2006), meaning that sensegiving is most successful if it provides "organizationally sanctioned answers" (Press & Arnould, 2011, p. 654) to employees' most pressing questions. Sensemaking has been demonstrated to evolve over four different stages with each stage having distinctive characteristics and demands (Isabella, 1990). Employees' main questions and concerns change as they advance in their sensemaking. For example, whereas employees show a high interest in the benefits associated with the change in early change phases, the importance of these decreases as the change progresses (Kim, Hornung, & Rousseau, 2011). However, extant research has so far rather neglected how leaders adapt their sensegiving to employees' main sensemaking needs over the course of a change process.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to address these research gaps by focusing on the content and process of successful leader sensegiving. Specifically, the thesis focuses on the following research questions:

- (1) How is the leader sensegiving process affected by moderators at the individual and organizational level at different phases?
- (2) How do the content and context of leader appeals interact to increase the effect on employees' readiness for change?
- (3) What dominant sensemaking needs do employees experience in each phase of a change process and how do leaders account for these sensemaking needs in their sensegiving?

By answering these questions, this dissertation aims to contribute to extant research in the field of organizational behavior by broadening our understanding of the process of content of successful leader sensegiving in three ways. First, this thesis highlights the role of moderators for leader sensegiving in times of organizational change. In particular, the research presented here answers calls to investigate how factors on the individual and organizational level (George & Jones, 2001) affect sensegiving at two stages of the process. On the one hand, this dissertation demonstrates how moderators affect the way leaders set up their sensegiving. On the other hand, it shows how moderators influence the impact of leader sensegiving on employee sensemaking. This enriches our understanding of 'why and how leaders choose the types of [...] framing strategies they do' (Foldy et al., 2008, p. 527) as well as our understanding of the relevance of context for effective leader sensegiving.

Second, this thesis investigates how the effectiveness of a specific sensegiving strategy, leader appeals to announce a change initiative, can be enhanced through the alignment of content and context. By creating a fit between the abstractness of the announcement (e.g., if the change is happening in the near or distant future) and the social

distance between the leader and the employee (e.g., if the change is announced by a team leader or the CEO), leaders might increase the effect of this sensegiving strategy on employees' readiness for change. Thus, this research enriches our understanding of sensegiving by shifting the focus from sensegiving as a complex construct consisting of a multitude of strategies (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013) to sensegiving as a construct consisting of particular strategies with specific requirements to unfold its full effect on employee sensemaking. The dissertation thus highlights how leaders need to consider the context of specific strategies in order to fully tap the potential of their sensegiving activities.

Third, this research strengthens the literature on the process perspective of sensemaking and sensegiving by outlining how employee sensemaking is dominated by varying needs over the course of a change process that are taken into account through respective sensegiving modes by their leaders. Thus, calls to alter our research focus to employees as "active co-producers" (Shamir, 2007, p. 9) instead of mere recipients are followed. Furthermore, the temporal perspective enriches our understanding of leader sensegiving as it occurs over time in the different phases of a change process, following calls to take a process perspective when investigating leadership activities (Shamir, 2011).

In the following, the two main theoretical concepts of this thesis, employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving, will be presented. After discussing the methodological approach of the underlying studies, the main results as well as the overall structure of the thesis will be introduced.

## **1.2 Theoretical Background**

### **1.2.1 Employee Sensemaking**

Sensemaking describes the attempt to construct meaning through interpreting and explaining environmental cues (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). This interpretive process allows individuals to "comprehend, understand, extrapolate and predict" (Weick,

1995, p. 4) their surroundings on the basis of cognitive maps (Ring & Rands, 1989). These maps consist of schemas, defined as knowledge constructions that interpret or explain the reality (Bingham & Kahl, 2013; Maitlis, 2005). Through sensemaking, employees either adjust existing schemas or produce new ones. The extent to which individuals need to alter their schemas depends on the discrepancy that is experienced between their expectations and the experienced reality (Louis & Sutton, 1991), thus depending on the applicability of their current schemas to the new context. In times of organizational change, this discrepancy is usually very high. For example, employees may realize that a goal they have been working towards in the past is no longer valued due to new targets set by a change initiative (George & Jones, 2001).

This discrepancy between the known and the new environment triggers an active sensemaking mode (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Weick, 1995). Organizational members attempt to overcome negative feelings associated with change by making sense of the “why, what and how of change” (Stensaker, Falkenberg, & Gronhaug, 2008, p. 166). Here, sensemaking shows a high level of involvement and an active engagement with the environment (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). During their sensemaking, employees draw on both internal and external sources for cues (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993). Internal sources include personal dispositions, experiences, and perceptions about the work context and the change initiative itself (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Bartunek et al., 2006; Kuntz & Gomes, 2012; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). For example, individuals might draw on knowledge structures established through experiences in previous change processes (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, Christy L., 1984). External information derives mainly from the interaction with others (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) and constitutes different forms of communication, both formal and informal, spoken and written (Balogun & Johnson, 2004,

2005). Here, sensegiving from others is a major source during change processes (Steigenberger, 2015). Overall, sensemaking is the result of individual experiences in an organizational setting, nourished by one's own experiences, organizational norms, and values, as well as the exchange with others.

Ultimately, sensemaking aims at producing schemas that allow individuals to understand their environment and act accordingly (Greenberg, 1995; Maitlis, 2005). These new schemas allow employees to restore routines and overcome the ambiguity associated with change (Greenberg, 1995). Thus, in order to conclude their active sensemaking mode, organizational members need to experience accordance between their new schemas and their environment (Stensaker et al., 2008). If these schemas are consistent with those intended by the change initiators, employees are very likely to show a positive change attitude (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), such as readiness for change, that is, an individual's "beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding the extent to which changes are needed and the organization's capacity to successfully undertake those changes" (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993, p. 681). As congruent interpretive schemas among employees are crucial for the success of change initiatives, leaders attempt to affect employee sensemaking through sensegiving. This process will be elaborated in the following chapter.

### **1.2.2 Leader Sensegiving**

Sensegiving is defined as the attempt "to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). This process of communicating meanings and beliefs (Mantere et al., 2012) is critical to effectively master organizational change (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) as it entails the chance to direct and guide employee sensemaking. Sensemaking is a fundamental social process (Maitlis, 2005), in that employees interact both laterally (with each other) and vertically (with their managers) to

understand the world and act accordingly (Balogun, 2006). Although both interactions are relevant for successful sensegiving (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), leader sensegiving has a distinctive role in this process due to the hierarchical position of senior managers (Mantere et al., 2012). Thus, sensegiving is a “fundamental leadership activity” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 22), especially in times of organizational change.

In terms of its forms, sensegiving comprises discursive and symbolic strategies (Sonenshein, 2006). Discursive tactics include all forms of communication, both “written and spoken, formal and informal” (Balogun, 2006, p. 31), such as making messages appear logical, issuing a warning, contesting a proposal, or expressing an opinion (Bartunek, Krim, Neccochea, & Humphries, 1999; Maitlis, 2005). Symbolic tactics refer to actions which have a meaning beyond themselves, such as making personnel changes, restructuring programs, and meeting with frontline employees (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Isabella, 1990). Using these strategies, leaders convey their understanding of the change initiative by constructing convincing stories about the change initiatives (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012; Weick, 1995). Thus, the same strategy used by two leaders can imply different narratives according to the content each one chooses. For example, whereas one leader might stress the benefits of the change as the main component for his or her sensegiving, the second leader could emphasize the major context of the change and how it fits into an overall strategy. Ultimately, each leader aims at providing a feasible interpretation of reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) that is shared among all organizational members (Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998). Leader sensegiving thus aims at developing coherent schemas among employees to affect “how people think, feel and act” (Whittle, Housley, Gilchrist, Mueller, & Lenney, 2014, p. 2) towards change.

### **1.3 Research Methods and Data Sources**

The present dissertation investigates the topic of leader sensegiving in times of organizational change from different methodological angles: conceptually, quantitatively, and

qualitatively. The first study (Chapter 2) on sensegiving moderators is a conceptual study based on a systematic review of the literature. The second study (Chapter 3) applied an experimental online study to examine how content and context of a specific sensegiving strategy affect employees' attitude towards change. The third study (Chapter 4) investigates modes of employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving using qualitative interviews.

The vast majority of extant research in the field of sensemaking and sensegiving is either conceptual (e.g., Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013; Weick et al., 2005) or qualitative research (Foldy et al., 2008; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013). Only very few studies approach the research object using a quantitative angle as, for example, Lines (2007) does. The reason for this might be the interpretive nature of sensegiving (Stensaker et al., 2008) which demands "observing and interpreting organization members' constructions and accounts" (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p. 59). These requirements suggest the use of conceptual or qualitative methods to investigate the subject (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Isabella, 1990; Weick, 2012). Sensegiving is a complex process which, if investigated as an entity, requires interpretive methods. However, sensegiving comprises a variety of strategies, such as making personnel changes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), conducting workshops (Balogun, 2006), or communicating with followers (Bartunek et al., 1999). Thus, quantitative methods can be applied if the research focuses on one specific sensegiving strategy rather than on the process as a whole. Here, instead of investigating the breadth of the sensegiving process which requires the use of qualitative methods, the focus lies on one specific strategy that is examined in depth. As the focus shifts from an integral perspective on the sensegiving process to a specific perspective on one element, scholars can draw from other disciplines that have investigated this specific strategy from a different angle. For example, when examining leader appeals as a means of sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), the research can be enriched by knowledge from the

field of change communication (e.g., Frahm & Brown, 2007; Kitchen & Daly, 2002; Lewis, 1999, 2000; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). The following paragraphs give a brief overview of the methodological approach of each study of this dissertation; a detailed description of each study will be provided in Chapters 2-4.

First, the role of moderators in the sensegiving process during organizational change was investigated utilizing a systematic literature review using relevant databases and journals. Fifty-nine articles were reviewed to assess their relevance in making a contribution to our knowledge on contextual factors at the design or outcome stage of leader sensegiving and identify potential moderators. In the end, the review included 18 articles dealing with the four moderators that were mentioned most often in the upcoming articles.

Second, to examine the effect content and context of leader appeals on employees' readiness for change, two experimental scenario-based study were conducted online. The first study comprised a total of 301 participants, the second study 218 participants. The data were analyzed using MANCOVA.

Third, a qualitative interview study was conducted to investigate employee sensemaking needs and corresponding leader sensegiving modes. Twenty-nine employees and twenty-six leaders from organizations undergoing change were interviewed. Template analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts, a middle way between purely deductive and inductive analysis (Hadley, 2014).

### **1.4 Structure and Main Results**

Each chapter of this dissertation examines leader sensegiving in the context of organizational change from a different angle.

Chapter 2 investigates the process of leader sensegiving in the light of relevant moderators. In total, four moderators that affect leader sensegiving at two phases are introduced and discussed. During the first phase, moderators affect the relationship between

leader sensemaking and sensegiving. On the organizational level, schema consistency moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that the positive relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving intensity will be stronger at low levels of schema consistency. On the individual level, legitimate power moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving in such a way that managers are most likely to use direct, unilateral strategies as well as abstract, positive, and normative language if their level of legitimate power is high. If their level of legitimate power is low, they are most likely to use indirect, multilateral strategies as well as concrete, negative, and rational language. During the second phase, the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking is moderated by two factors. On the organizational level, the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking is moderated by schema consistency such that leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an alteration of existing schemas (emergence of new schemas) in employee sensemaking if it shows high (low) consistency with existing schemas. On the individual level, the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking is moderated by employees' emotional state in such a way that leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an alteration of existing schemas (emergence of new schemas) in employee sensemaking if employees experience positive (negative) emotions during sense-receiving.

Chapter 3 focuses on a specific sensegiving strategy, namely leader appeals to announce change. The study investigates whether the content and context of a leader appeal need to coincide to increase its effectiveness on employees' readiness for change. Specifically, the research draws on the fit between the level of abstractness communicated in the announcement (abstract versus concrete leader appeal) and the social distance between leader and follower. As construal fit has been shown to increase followers' engagement with leader communication (Berson & Halevy, 2014), the second study of this dissertation

provides first indications that a fit between the abstractness of the leader appeal as expressed in the temporal distance of the message and leader-follower social distance enhances employees' perception of management support, a sub-scale of readiness for change.

Chapter 4 describes dominant employee sensemaking needs over the course of a change process and leaders' corresponding sensegiving modes. The study demonstrates the prevailing need and sensegiving mode for each phase of a change process (e.g., Bullock & Batten, 1985; Isabella, 1990). The first phase, exploration, is characterized by employees' need for reassurance, which is answered by leaders' receptive sensegiving. In the second phase, called preparation, leaders respond to employees' need for orientation by exhibiting participative sensegiving. During the third phase, implementation, employees experience a need for balance that is addressed by leaders' compensating sensegiving. Finally, during evaluation, leaders show evaluative sensegiving as a response to employees' need for acknowledgment.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive discussion of the results illustrated in Chapters 2-4. The main contributions of this dissertation to our understanding of sensegiving as a contextual process as well as implications for theory and practice are discussed. This dissertation concludes by outlining potential directions for future research in the field of leader sensegiving.

## 2 The Critical Role of Moderators in Leader Sensegiving<sup>1</sup>

Organizational change alters “how an organization functions, who its members and leaders are, what form it takes or how it allocates its resources” (Huber, Sutcliffe, Miller, & Glick, 1993, p. 216). Change causes modifications in the frameworks of its members (Bartunek & Moch, 1987), which oftentimes leads to resistance to change as it disrupts their sense of the environment (Furst & Cable, 2008). Thus, change initiatives force employees to actively engage in sensemaking, a process that describes the effort to create order and produce meaning of what occurs in the environment (Weick, 1993, 1995). In order to support the change initiative in their organization, leaders attempt to influence this process by conveying the meaning of the change through purposeful sensegiving, which is defined as the ambition to influence others’ sensemaking towards a certain direction (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Thus, leaders sensegiving is an important source for employee sensemaking that enables shared interpretations of change (Mantere et al., 2012), and supportive change behavior (van den Heuvel, Machteld, Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2013).

Previous research has provided important insights in the field of sensegiving, e.g. on strategies (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Vlaar et al., 2008), actors (Balogun, 2003), as well as triggers and enablers (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). However, the study of sensegiving lacks an explicit account of the social context (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014; Weber & Glynn, 2006) although giving and “making sense [...] is not an accomplishment in a vacuum, it is not just context-free networking” (Taylor & van Every, 2000, p. 251). The a-contextual study of sensegiving entails the risk of neglecting relevant factors: indeed, the high number of unsuccessful change initiatives (Burnes & Jackson, 2011) suggests that sensegiving does not always proceed effectively and should be sensitive to the

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on a working paper by Kraft, Sparr, and Peus (2015a), currently under review at the Journal of Change Management

context. Investigating moderator variables in the sensegiving–sensemaking relationship helps to better understand facilitators and boundary conditions of leaders’ sensegiving influence on employee sensemaking.

This chapter attempts to tackle this gap in the literature by systematically reviewing the literature on sensegiving in organizational change to identify moderators at two phases of the leader sensegiving – employee sensemaking process: during the first phase, where leader sensemaking affects their sensegiving, and during the second phase, where leader sensegiving affects employee sensemaking. For both phases, this study distinguishes between moderators on the individual and organizational level as “resistance to change can stem both from the individual as well as from the social and organizational context” (George & Jones, 2001, p. 422). This is in line with recent calls to take different levels of analysis into account when investigating organizational change processes (Amis & Aïssaoui, 2013; Scott, 2010; Vakola, 2013). Thus, this study will attempt to answer the following research question: *How is the leader sensegiving process affected by moderators at the individual and organizational level at different phases?*

Drawing on information processing theory, this chapter offers explanations for the moderating effect of the moderators on leader sensegiving. Information processing theory suggests that individuals engage in automatic processing when environmental demands are low, e.g. under conditions of “business as usual” (Louis & Sutton, 1991, p. 55), and in conscious information processing when environmental demands are high, e.g. disruptions caused by organizational change (Lord & Maher, 1990). Its relevance for organizational change is high: individuals switch between automatic and conscious information processing as they try to make sense of it.

This chapter contributes to the literature by (1) reviewing the existing literature on sensegiving during organizational change under the lens of contextual factors, (2)

demonstrating how moderators affect sensegiving and thus ultimately the success of change initiatives during two phases of the sensegiving process, and (3) introducing a multi-level perspective on leader sensegiving by distinguishing between moderators on the individual and organizational level. Practitioners benefit from this research by understanding how the context affects the success of their sensegiving activities. In the following section, the process of leader sensegiving in times of change will be introduced before discussing how the identified moderators affect this process in two different phases.

## 2.1 Theoretical Background

The model as depicted in Figure 1 outlines a basic process of leader sensegiving as described in previous studies (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kuntz & Gomes, 2012; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

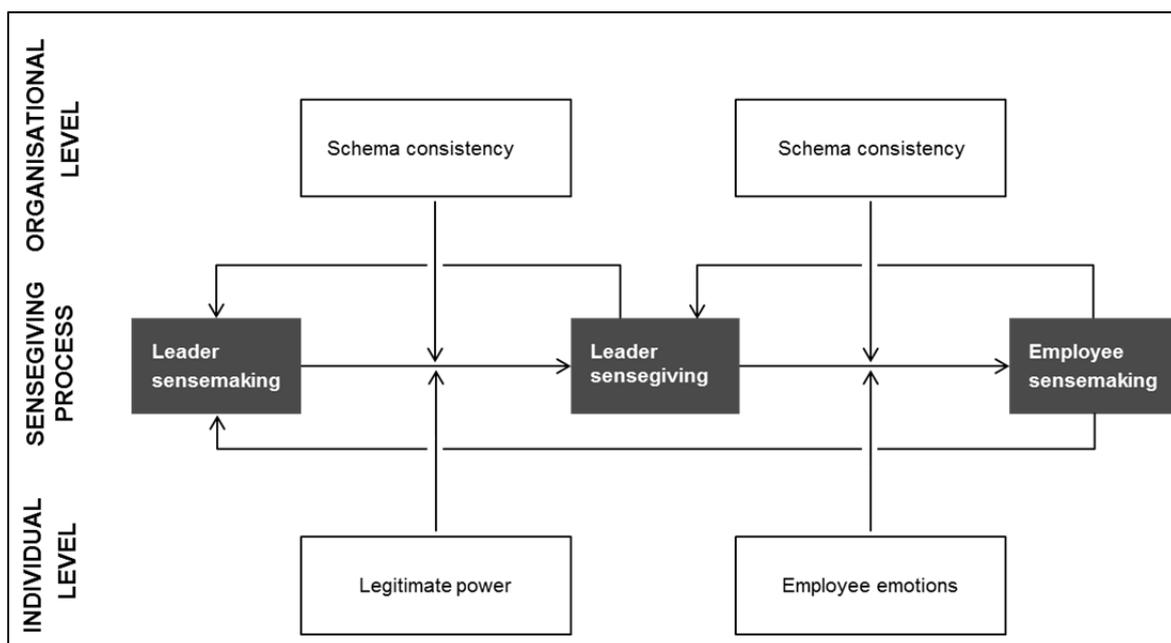


Figure 1: Moderators of Leader Sensegiving.

The reciprocity of the process is demonstrated by the feedback loops from employee sensemaking to leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving. This review focuses on the direction from leader to employees because this is the main focus of the current literature. However, the model points out that sensemaking and sensegiving are reciprocal processes (Vlaar et al.,

2008) where individuals often attempt to make and give sense at the same time to each other (Stensaker et al., 2008). Leader sensemaking is therefore as much affected by own and others' sensegiving attempts as vice versa (Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011; Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence, 2011).

### **2.1.1 Sensemaking**

Sensemaking describes the effort to establish sense and create order of what happens in one's environment (Weick, 1993). Thus, it comprises the individual attempt to interpret and explain environmental cues in a meaningful way (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). During organizational change, which is characterized by high complexity, ambiguity and stress (Volkema, Farquhar & Bergmann, 1996), organizational members engage in sensemaking to overcome the discrepancy between the old and new organizational identity (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2011; Louis, 1980; Louis & Sutton, 1991; Weick et al., 2005). In times of change, sensemaking usually becomes a conscious process (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 1990): individuals draw on internal and external sources to gain information (Bartunek et al., 2006; Kuntz & Gomes, 2012; Thomas et al., 1993). This input is manifested in schemas, the "knowledge structures that contain categories of information and relationships among them" (Bingham & Kahl, 2013, p. 14). In order to integrate the new information provided through the change, individuals can either alter existing schemas or create new ones (Maitlis et al., 2013), depending on the discrepancy between the existing schemas and the requirements of the new environment. The bigger the gap between the old and the new, the more important it becomes for individuals to move from 'top-down' information processing, where they rely on past experiences, to 'bottom-up' processing, where they actively deal with the new information (Lord & Maher, 1990; Walsh, 1995).

In this first phase, which describes the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving, the outcome of leader sensemaking is transformed into meaning and becomes

tangible through a leader's sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Figure 1 depicts the process with its different phases, moving from leader sensemaking to leader sensegiving and employee sensegiving.

### **2.1.2 Sensegiving**

Sensegiving is an interpretive process in which individuals exert mutual influence to affect others' sensemaking (Bartunek et al., 1999; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Successful sensegiving results in a shared interpretation of the change (Mantere et al., 2012). Sensegiving in organizations is not a one-way process but rather constitutes of ongoing cycles where sensemaking and sensegiving organizational members affect each other (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). However, leaders are privileged for sensegiving due to their hierarchical position (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

In order to build consensus in interpretation (Narayanan, Zane, & Kemmerer, 2010), leaders have to take into account recipients' current state and needs in sensemaking to adjust their sensegiving activities respectively. The content they offer in their sensegiving activities can thus vary from high-level input, e.g. on the vision of a change initiative (Illia, Bonaiuto, Pugliese, & van Rekom, 2011), to more detailed information on the change process (Chreim, 2006; Stensaker et al., 2008), depending on the needs organizational members encounter.

In terms of strategies, recent literature distinguishes between discursive and non-discursive strategies (Smith, Plowman, & Duchon, 2010, Sonenshein, 2006), comprising "...statements or activities" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 29). Examples for discursive strategies are meetings (Chaudhry, Wayne, & Chalk, 2009), newsletters (Greenberg, 1995) and memos (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Gutierrez et al., 2010; Labianca et al., 2000). Non-discursive strategies are usually considered to be symbolic (Sonenshein, 2006). Examples range from rituals and symbolic objects (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi Kumar, 1994; Latta, 2009; Monin et al., 2013; Pitsakis, 2012), workshops and seminars

(Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence, 2011; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Rousseau, 1996; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011) to restructuring measures (Bisel & Barge, 2011; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hope, 2010; Humphreys et al., 2012).

The second phase describes the relationship between leader sensegiving and recipient sensemaking. During this phase, leader sensegiving affects recipients' sensemaking. Again, employee sensemaking is not only influenced by leader sensegiving, but also affects leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). These reciprocal loops are depicted as feedback loops in Figure 1.

### **2.1.3 Information Processing in Organizational Change**

This chapter will draw on information theory to explain the moderating effect of the discussed moderators on leader sensegiving in organizational change. The theory suggests that individuals interpret and make sense of organizational change building on schemas (Hahn, Preuss, Pinske, & Figge, 2015), the “cognitive structure or frameworks by which generic concepts derived from past events and experiences are stored in memory” (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, p. 525).

The extent to which organizational change is ambiguous and complex influences the level of engagement that organizational members contribute to this change (Mantere et al., 2012). As complexity increases, individuals cannot longer rely on their previous experiences to make sense of the situation (Walsh, 1995). In familiar situations, existing schemas guide the interpretation as they provide “situational forecasts on which individuals rely” (Louis & Sutton, 1991, p. 61). This top-down processing mode requires only little attention and cognitive attention as people can draw on existing knowledge structures (Narayanan et al., 2010). However, in situations characterized by novelty and discrepancy, these schemas become obsolete and inadequate for top-down information processing. Therefore, existing schemas need to be adapted or changed to facilitate future information processing (Lord

& Maher, 1990). Organizational members use existing information to engage in bottom-up information processing, characterized by active sensemaking and resulting in the emergence of new schemas (Narayanan et al., 2010). Although bottom-up processing might often be superior in its results (Louis & Sutton, 1991), it also requires more attention and effort as individuals need to build up new schemas.

## 2.2 Method

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify relevant moderators of the sensegiving process. Relevant articles were searched in four databases (*Business Source Premier, ERIC, PsycInfo, Social Sciences Citation Index*). As the literature on organizational change is large and fragmented (Weick & Quinn, 1999), I additionally conducted a manual search in ten high-rank journals in management and organizational behavior as well as the most relevant journals in the field of sensegiving and organizational change (*Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, Human Relations, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Change Management, Journal of Organizational Change Management, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Organization Science, Leadership Quarterly*). The keywords for the search were ‘organizational change’ and ‘sensemaking’ or ‘sensegiving’. In total, over 500 articles came up through the literature search. In a first assessment, the abstracts of these articles were scanned to identify papers that dealt explicitly with sensegiving in times of organizational change. Then, the remaining 59 articles were reviewed to assess their relevance in making a contribution to our knowledge on contextual factors on leader sensegiving and identify potential moderators. After this first round of reviewing, 26 papers dealing with seven moderators during sensegiving were identified, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Outcome of Literature Review

<b>Moderator</b>	<b>Paper</b>
<b>Schema consistency</b> (first phase)	Bisel, R. S., & Barge, J. K. (2011)
	Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. (2004)
	Drori, I., & Ellis, S. (2011)
	Latta, G. F. (2009)
	Ravasi, D., & Schultz, M. (2006)
<b>Legitimate power</b> (first phase)	Drori, I., & Ellis, S. (2011)
	Leonardi, P. M., Neeley, T. B., & Gerber, E. M. (2012)
	Lines, R. (2007)
	Sonenshein, S. (2006)
<b>Schema consistency</b> (second phase)	Bisel, R. S., & Barge, J. K. (2011)
	Denis, J.-L., Lamothe, L., Langley, A., Breton, M., Gervais, J., Trottier, L.-H., Contandriopoulos, D. & Dubois, C.-A. (2009)
	Dunford, R., & Jones, D. (2000)
	Humphreys, M., Ucbasaran, D., & Lockett, A. (2012)
	Latta, G. F. (2009)
	Näslund, L., & Perner, F. (2012)
	Sonenshein, S. (2010)
	Cornelissen, J. P., Holt, R., & Zundel, M. (2011)
<b>Emotions</b> (second phase)	Gioia, D. A., & Chittipeddi, K. (1991)
	Maitlis, S., & Sonenshein, S. (2010)
	Vuori, T., & Virtaharju, J. (2012)
	Maitlis, S., Vogus, T. J., & Lawrence, T. B. (2013)
<b>Management style</b> (not included in review)	Greenberg (1995)
	Weber, P. S. & Manning, M. R. (2001)

<b>Middle management sensegiving</b> (not included in review)	Balogun (2006)
	Beck (2009)
	Hope (2010)
<b>Skill and character</b> (not included in review)	Akrivou, K. & Bradbury-Huang, H. (2011)
	Fisher & Howell (2004)
	Maitlis, M. & Lawrence T. B. (2007)

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In the following, I focused on the moderators which were mentioned most often in the literature, thus excluding three moderators from further elaboration (management style, middle management sensegiving, skill and character). These four moderators were then integrated into the basic model of leader sensegiving. As demonstrated in Table 1, the moderators with greatest attention in the literature review came from the fields of power, emotion, and organizational culture – all topics considered as ‘ways in which present thinking about sensemaking might be enhanced’ (Weick et al., 2005, p. 417).

## 2.3 Results

### 2.3.1 Moderators of the Leader Sensemaking – Leader Sensegiving Relationship

After making sense of the “why, what, and how of change” (Stensaker, Falkenberg & Gronhaug, 2008, p. 166), leaders attempt to convey their understanding to employees. Thus, they are facing the challenge of setting up their sensegiving in a way that maximizes its desired influence on employee sensemaking. Two moderators that affect the way leaders set up their sensegiving were identified through the review.

**Organizational Level: Schema Consistency.** As depicted in Table 1, five studies describe how organizational schemas affect the translation of leaders’ sensemaking into leaders’ sensegiving in this first phase. Organizational schemas contain knowledge about the culture and identity of an organization (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013) and determine the “‘tool kit’ or repertoire from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of

action” (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). Each individual organizes his or her knowledge about the organization in schemas (Bartunek & Moch, 1987), which guide the interpretation and understanding of events. For example, schemas organize knowledge about attitudinal or behavioral aspects of organizational members and roles, e.g. the trustworthiness of colleagues which in turn affects the evaluation of their actions based on previous experiences.

The significance of schemas for the setup of leader sensegiving is demonstrated by Bisel and Barge’s research (2011) on a planned change effort in a healthcare organization. They identified two major influence factors on change messages. On the one hand, the actual events needs to be incorporated, for example the organizational change that is caused by a budget deficit. On the other hand, these actual events need to be put in line with what is anchored about the organization in employees’ schemas, e.g. that the organization is incapable of closing this budget deficit. Both factors affect leader sensegiving as they try to create a message that is suitable for their employees’ sensemaking needs. The organizational context signals what the leader has to take into account when setting up sensegiving activities.

Similarly, Ravasi and Schultz (2006) describe how aspirations for the future were related to the cultural knowledge about the company during leader sensegiving in an organizational change at Bang & Olufsen. For example, leaders used the products of the company as a starting point for their understanding of what the core values of the organization were and how they could address the upcoming change drawing on these values. Their research demonstrates that “organizational culture supplies members with cues [...] for ‘giving sense’ of it” (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006, p. 437). Also Drori and Ellis (2011) mention that “sensegiving is always constrained by its organizational context which provides [...] the agenda, rules or style” (p. 4). They demonstrated in their research how leaders reflected the organizational culture in their sensegiving by using power games that were already established as a starting point to design their sensegiving attempts.

The changed organizational identity also creates a sensegiving imperative for leaders. Corley and Gioia's (2004) research shows how leaders used the tensions between the current and the new identity in order to deduce appropriate sensegiving strategies, for example modeling behaviors. This gap between the old and the new is also mentioned by Latta's (2009) study in a public research university undergoing change: leaders took into account the current organizational meaning to frame an appropriate vision for the future "that catalyzes cultural elements [...] [creating] a powerful means of galvanizing support among followers" (Latta, 2009, p. 26). They depend on their tacit knowledge about the organizational culture, represented in their schemas, to align the change with what employees already know about the organization.

The review demonstrated the current understanding of the importance of organizational schemas for leader sensegiving. In order to elaborate how schemas moderate the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving, the following section will draw on information processing theory. The theory suggests that a high consistency between new information and existing schemas only requires individuals to alter those parts of the schemas that are not yet in line with this new information. However, if existing schemas are not suitable to understand the new information, organizational members need to engage in the full schema emergence process to create new and appropriate schemas (Bingham & Kahl, 2013). This results in different levels of intensity for the own sensemaking process as creating new schemas is more demanding and effortful than altering existing ones (Maitlis et al., 2013).

When leaders experience high sensemaking intensity, they will consider the change as challenging to understand and embrace (Weick et al., 2005). This will trigger more intensive sensegiving efforts as leaders want to ensure employee sensemaking results in a shared understanding of the change. Previous research has demonstrated that high leader sensegiving results in controlled sensemaking processes and unitary accounts among employees (Maitlis,

2005). Thus, leader sensemaking directly affects the intensity of sensegiving activities as they evaluate various relevant criteria, e.g. how much time they can and want to invest, how important their sensegiving will be to achieve a shared understanding, whether other leaders engage in sensegiving or not, or how important this change is for them. However, this direct relationship will be moderated by the degree of experienced consistency between own schemas as a result of their sensemaking (which might have been altered or newly created) and the existing organizational schemas. An experienced low consistency with existing schemas will increase the felt need to engage in high levels of sensegiving even more, whereas high consistency will decrease the intensity of their sensegiving as it affects their perception of organizational and individual schemas already being in accordance.

*Proposition 1. Schema consistency moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that the positive relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving intensity will be stronger at low levels of schema consistency than at high levels of schema consistency.*

For example, leaders' high sensemaking engagement, expressed for example by an active search for information and continuous discussions with other organizational members, is very likely to lead to high levels of sensegiving as they experience the sensemaking as effortful and thus wish to support their subordinates' sensemaking in a meaningful manner. However, if their sensemaking ultimately only results in an adaptation of existing schemas, for example because an acquired company turns out to be highly similar in terms of its culture during the post-merger phase, this will decrease lead to lower sensegiving intensity. By contrast, if they experience the new company as very different and thus need to alter their understanding of their own organization with respect to these changes, this inconsistency between their previous and new organizational schema will increase their sensegiving intensity even more. This means that radical changes - transformations that changes the

existing orientation of an organization (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Miller, 1982) – are especially likely to lead to low levels of schema consistency, thus increasing the positive relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving intensity.

**Individual Level: Legitimate Power.** Legitimate power is derived from formal authority stemming from the position in the organization (French & Raven, 1959). It is anchored in policies, rules, and laws (Milliken, Magee, Lam, & Menezes, 2008) and can be expressed for example by determining the salary of a subordinate. A leader's level of legitimate power is found to moderate both the choice of strategies and language in sensegiving. Four studies were identified through the review for the moderating effect of legitimate power (see Table 1).

Drori and Ellis (2011) demonstrated in their studies on power games and sensegiving how managers with high positional power used confrontation, e.g. discrediting field offices, as a strategy to give sense to others during organizational change, thus displaying their power in their sensegiving attempt. As demonstrated by Leonardi, Neeley, and Gerber (2012), leaders with low legitimate power often pay more attention to how and what to communicate in order to increase receptiveness as they are more aware of differing perceptions among employees. They often turn to instant media (e.g., forums with real-time feedback) whereas leaders with higher levels of legitimate power tend to focus on message transmission and therefore often prefer one-directional media (Leonardi et al., 2012). Legitimate power is also related to the use of more direct sensegiving techniques (Sonenshein, 2006). For example, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) mention the use of resource allocations and personnel changes as sensegiving strategies in their study on a university undergoing organizational change. However, one study could not find an influence of legitimate power on sensegiving (Lines, 2007). This finding was explained by the impact of institutional norms, recipient expectations and the operationalization of legitimate power.

These examples show how the level of legitimate power moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving through affecting a leader's perception of his or her legitimation to exert sensegiving. Leader sensemaking directly affects their choice of sensegiving strategies as it provides them with a sense of what is appropriate for this change. The findings from the review can be supplemented by drawing on construal level theory which states that the distance experienced by an individual leads to more or less abstract interpretations of persons or objects (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). If leaders experience a high level of legitimate power, this will also increase their sense of psychological distance and lead to a more abstract way of processing information: "The ability to see the bigger picture, to plan ahead, to keep an eye on higher goals, may be prerequisites for obtaining power as well as requirements for maintaining it." (Smith & Trope, 2006, p. 579). This holds especially true for social distance, the distance one feels from others (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2012). For example, previous studies have shown that leaders with high legitimate power will experience their followers as being very different from themselves (high social distance) whereas leaders with low legitimate power will experience them as being similar to themselves (low social distance) (Lammers et al., 2012). Thus, the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving is moderated by legitimate power such that a leader's tendency to choose direct, unilateral strategies will be reinforced if their level of legitimate power is high. High-power leaders experience their sense of power as a mandate to support subordinates' sensemaking via sensegiving. As they process information more abstractly than low power leaders (Smith & Trope, 2006), they do not reflect on individual employee needs to tailor their sensegiving. By contrast, leaders with a preference for indirect, multilateral strategies after engaging in sensemaking will be even more likely to do so if their level of legitimate power is low, as they will engage in concrete information processing (Smith & Trope, 2006) and thus comprehend sensegiving as an offer for employees which has

to be tailored to individuals' needs. This is reflected in the sensegiving strategies leaders choose.

*Proposition 2. The level of legitimate power moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that:*

*(a) Leaders are more likely to use direct, unilateral sensegiving strategies if their level of legitimate power is high.*

*(b) Leaders are more likely to use indirect, multilateral sensegiving strategies if their level of legitimate power is low.*

The papers identified through the review also revealed that the level of legitimate power not only moderates leaders' selection of sensegiving strategies, but also their language. There are two ways how the level of legitimate power moderates a leaders' sensegiving language. First, Sonenshein (2006) found that individuals with low legitimate power use more economic justifications (e.g., referring to the financial consequences of an initiative) than leaders with significant legitimate power. The latter also use a softer, more normative language, which is explained by their hierarchical position and the ascribed power (Sonenshein, 2006). Beyond the review findings, this is supported by a study executed by Yukl and Tracey (1992) who demonstrated that in the absence of legitimate power, individuals will attempt to increase their perceived legitimacy by using rational arguments.

Furthermore, the level of power and the associated differences in the abstractness of information processing will also affect leaders' choice of sensegiving language. High levels of psychological distance have significant effects on the language as the experienced abstractness is translated into an abstract language (Milliken et al., 2008) and increases the likelihood of ignoring negative aspects (Magee, Milliken, & Lurie, 2009).

*Proposition 3: Legitimate power moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that:*

*(a) Leaders are more likely to use abstract, positive and normative language if their level of legitimate power is high.*

*(b) Leaders are more likely to use concrete, negative, and rational language if their level of legitimate power is low.*

Although the review was not restricted to legitimate power, the articles on the role of power almost exclusively dealt with this power base. Only one study came up in the literature review that described the effect of another form of power on leader sensegiving. Lines (2007) provides insights on the influence of expert power on change agents' engagement regarding sensegiving activities. Expert power is defined as the extent of knowledge that a person has in a given area (French & Raven, 1959). According to their study, expert power seems to increase the amount of sensegiving used by leaders, especially with regards to strategies that allow organizational members to participate in the change (Lines, 2007). However, as no other study on expert power was identified through the literature search, this power base was excluded from further discussion.

### **2.3.2 Moderators of the Leader Sensegiving – Employee Sensemaking Relationship**

How sensegiving is received and incorporated in employee sensemaking is affected by the social context within which it occurs. External factors become even more important as the reception of leader sensegiving occurs in a social context where leaders have limited impact on the surroundings. Two moderators which affect how effective leader sensemaking influences employee sensemaking in this phase were identified.

**Organizational Level: Schema Consistency.** On the organizational level, schema consistency is also a relevant moderator for the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking. Eight papers showing that “the relationship between the framing of a strategic change and its perceived legitimacy is moderated by the cultural familiarity of the frame” (Cornelissen et al., 2011, p. 1709) were reviewed.

Näslund and Perner (2012) describe how the dominant scheme of the company – having authoritative, independent leaders who are capable of mastering any challenge – collided with the assignment of external consultants. Consequently, the leaders engaged in the consulting project were seen as weak and inconsistent with the company's values, causing a decrease in trustworthiness. Sensegiving was impeded in this context as leader behavior lacked fit with the dominant scheme. Dunford and Jones (2000) describe the case of a telecommunications company where leaders' stories centered around the theme of continuous change, in line with the prevalent story of radical industrial change and the need for each company to follow this journey. Another study by Denis and his colleagues (2009) encountered an example for the negative consequences of sensegiving which was conflicting to existing schemas. In a hospital undergoing significant change, the affirmative style of a leader caused disjointed sensemaking among employees. In turn, effective sensegiving was hindered due to the detachment from the prevalent narrative, for example being the dominant hospital in a network of health and social service centers. This is in line with Humphreys and colleagues' (2012) findings on sensegiving stories among jazz musicians. Although a prominent and influential musician actively took over the role of sensegiver in order to shape the future of jazz music, his activities were refused as they were countering the dominant schemas. Similarly, Latta (2009) describes how change can be accelerated by aligning the strategies with the cultural principles in the organization. Also Bisel and Barge (2011) relate the potential success of change programs with change agents' ability to relate to an organization's discursive context.

Again, information processing theory provides an explanation for the positive effect of schema consistency on the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking. If leaders provide sensegiving consistent with existing knowledge structures, recipients need only little attention and information-processing capabilities (Walsh, 1995).

Thus, new information is processed more easily if it fits within existing knowledge structures (Bingham & Kahl, 2013). If leader sensegiving is consistent with existing organizational schemas, employees can build on these schemas to guide their interpretation as they provide “situational forecasts on which individuals rely” (Louis & Sutton, 1991, p. 61). Here, employees will only alter existing schemas to adopt them the new circumstances. They engage in top-down processing, the dominant response to new information (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010). Thus, sensegiving consistent with existing schemas is more likely to trigger top-down processing that does not aim to create new schemas but rather alters the existing ones. Furthermore, sensegiving consistent with existing schemas secures a leader’s political positioning and existing power structures (Dawson & Buchanan, 2005; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Murgia & Poggio, 2009). However, novel situations often require bottom-up cognitive processing as existing schemas are no longer adequate (Lord & Maher, 1990). Thus, in times of change leaders often need to frame their sensegiving in a way that is inconsistent with existing schemas. This entails the risk of preventing instead of fostering change (Murgia & Poggio, 2009) as consistency serves as an anchor for organizational members (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Therefore, sensegiving showing a high inconsistency to existing organizational schemas requires employees to engage in bottom-up processing as they need to understand and integrate these new schemas. Here, an alteration of existing schemas does not suffice and employees need to engage in the schema emergence process to establish new ones that are adequate for the changed environment (Bingham & Kahl, 2013). However, even though organizational change often requires leaders to break with established schemas in their sensegiving (Monin et al., 2013), they can still emphasize consistency with existing schemas by simultaneously preserving and changing organizational meaning to avoid a radical and immediate schema change (Sonenshein, 2010).

*Proposition 4: The relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking is moderated by schema consistency:*

*(a) Leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an alteration of existing schemas in employee sensemaking if it shows high consistency with existing schemas.*

*(b) Leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an emergence of new schemas in employee sensemaking if it shows low consistency with existing schemas.*

**Individual Level: Employee Emotions.** On the individual level, the reviewed studies suggest that emotions, which is defined as a “transient feeling state with an identified cause or target that can be expressed verbally or nonverbally” (Maitlis et al., 2013, p. 223), moderate the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking such that positive emotions lead to a stronger tendency to alter existing instead of create new schemas. Emotions are distinguished according to their valence (positive or negative) and their activation (high or low activation) (Russell & Barrett, 1999). For example, sadness is a negative, deactivating emotion whereas excitement is a positive, activating emotion (Russell, 2003).

Organizational change is usually associated with negative emotions, such as “ambiguity, confusion, and feelings of disorientation” (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 552). Here, emotions serve as a complementary form of establishing sense (Myers, 2007) by serving as “judgment-simplifying heuristic devices” (Bartunek et al., 2006, p. 189). Emotions influence sensemaking throughout the whole process (Maitlis et al., 2013; Weick et al., 2005) and can be more or less beneficial for the process. On the positive side, emotions influence the meaning of issues (Sonenshein, 2009) and increase the robustness of newly established schemas (Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012). On the negative side, emotions can derail sensemaking by decreasing the processing capacity (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

In the review, four papers referring to the expression of positive emotions were identified. On the one hand, leaders' expression of positive emotions has been found to have positive effects on employee sensemaking. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) describe leaders' expression of excitement and enthusiasm as a way to "influence employees' understandings of the value of the change" (p. 568). Also Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) refer to the positive effect of emotions when they mention a university president's "cheerleading quality" (p. 440) during a change initiative on campus. On the other hand, employees' positive emotions also increase their receptiveness for sensegiving messages. Vuori and Virtaharju (2012) investigated the role of emotional arousal in sensegiving and demonstrated that sensegiving produces more robust beliefs if receivers experience emotional arousal when incorporating the sensegiving message. Maitlis and colleagues (2013) demonstrated that the valence of a sensemaker's emotions lead to different sensemaking processes that can be more or less flexible and creative. Neither process is better or worse than the other; their appropriateness rather depends on the context.

The rationale behind the moderating effect of emotions on the effectiveness of sensegiving can be explained by information processing theory. According to this theory, emotions have an informative function (Schwarz & Clore, 1983) by implying information about the state of the environment which contributes to individual's understanding and evaluation of the surroundings (Schwarz & Clore, 2003). For example, negative feelings can signal a problematic situation, whereas positive emotions can lead to a positive judgment of a situation. This information about the environment is then included in one's thought processes. As human cognition strives to meet the demands posed by the environments, positive and negative emotions can lead to different information processing strategies (Schwarz & Clore, 2003). Whereas negative emotions promote a systematic, bottom-up processing style, positive emotions foster top-down processing (Schwarz & Clore, 2003). Individuals experiencing

positive feelings will evaluate their environment as benign and rely stronger on existing knowledge structures (Bless et al., 1996). They will have a stronger tendency to alter existing schemas as opposed to create new ones. Thus, the likelihood of leader sensegiving triggering bottom-up processing and the emergence of new schemas is lower under conditions of positive emotions as these foster a stronger tendency to build on existing schemas as opposed to creating new ones (Maitlis et al., 2013). This is supported by research demonstrating that positive feelings limit the processing capacity (Mackie & Worth, 1989) and lead to a demotivation to invest in cognitive efforts (Isen, 1987). Individuals experiencing positive emotions will have a stronger tendency to rely on existing schemas during their sensemaking, thus engaging in a top-down processing mode that leads to an alteration of existing schemas (Schwarz & Clore, 2003). By contrast, individuals having negative feelings often evaluate their environment as problematic or dangerous. This cues a detail-oriented bottom-up style for information processing, which is usually adequate to master difficult situations (Bless et al., 1996). They will attempt to develop new schemas that help to explain the environment as well as their emotions. Emotions influence the information processing style by directing individual's attention towards the allegedly most adequate information at hand: existing knowledge structures versus new data (Bless et al., 1996). As bottom-up processing is more demanding for individuals, negative emotions will decelerate the sensemaking process of individuals as they increase the tendency to engage in effortful, bottom-up processing resulting in the creation of new schemas. In summary, the stronger reliance on existing schema as well as the increased capacity to absorb new information leads to the final proposition.

*Proposition 5: The relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking is moderated by employees' emotional state:*

*(a) Leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an alteration of existing schemas in employee sensemaking if employees experience positive emotions during sense-receiving.*

*(b) Leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an emergence of new schemas in employee sensemaking if employees experience negative emotions during sense-receiving.*

## **2.4 Discussion**

In order to embrace change, organizational members need to believe in the necessity and appropriateness of a change initiative (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Leaders attempt to influence employees' beliefs by conveying the change meaning through sensegiving. However, context variables need to be considered in order to fully understand sensegiving in organizational change. This chapter contributes to the literature in reviewing sensegiving literature with regard to four moderators at the organizational and individual level as depicted in Figure 1 and integrating them into the basis model of leader sensegiving.

Thus, by drawing on information processing theory I outline how contextual factors affect the relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving in two phases of the sensegiving process. The distinction between the two phases highlights the different effect of moderators: whereas moderators in the first phase affect sensegiving intensity and content, those of the second phase affect the extent of schema change leader sensegiving evokes.

In the first phase, schema consistency on the organizational level moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that the positive relationship between the intensity of both processes will be even stronger at high levels of schema consistency. On the individual level, the level of legitimate power moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that high levels of power lead to a stronger preference of direct, unilateral strategies and abstract, positive and normative language in

sensegiving, whereas low levels of power lead to a stronger preference of indirect, multilateral strategies and concrete, negative and rational language.

During the second phase, schema consistency on the organizational level moderates the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking such that leader sensegiving will be more likely to trigger a schema alteration in employee sensemaking whereas a low consistency will be more likely to evoke the emergence of new schemas in employee sensemaking. On the individual level, leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an alteration of existing schemas in employee sensemaking if employees experience positive emotions during sense-receiving, whereas sensegiving is more likely to lead to the emergence of new schemas if employees experience negative emotions.

All four moderators affect the way how information about the change is being processed by leaders or employees. On the organizational level, schema consistency has a moderating effect on the level of engagement organizational members contribute to their sensemaking and sensegiving activities. It will not only moderate the level of intensity leaders contribute to sensegiving efforts, but also have a moderating impact on the level of engagement employees have for their sensemaking. On the individual level, both power and emotions affect the information processing by having a moderating effect on its level of abstractness. Whereas power leads to a more abstract way of processing information (Lammers et al., 2012) that is in consequence also translated into a more abstract sensegiving language, emotions will moderate the likelihood of leader sensegiving leading to top-down versus bottom-up processing.

### **2.4.1 Limitations**

Also this review sheds light on the role of moderators in leader sensegiving, this study has several limitations. First, the model used in this chapter represents only a snapshot of the sensegiving process which is characterized by dialogical dynamics between sensemaking and

sensegiving (Monin et al., 2013). However, both processes are not distinctive concepts but rather “two sides of the same coin – one implies the other and cannot exist without it” (Rouleau, 2005, p. 1415). On the one hand, the reciprocal character of both processes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) implies an inference from leaders’ sensegiving to their own sensemaking: “the leaders [...] seemed to be involved in a dialogue with themselves” (Dunford & Jones, 2000, p. 1223). On the other hand, employees are not only mere recipients of sensegiving attempts, they rather act as sensegivers themselves and attempt to influence their leaders (Stensaker et al., 2008).

Second, this chapter makes the implicit managerialist assumption that “a key aspect of leadership is to structure the way that the inputs of others are combined to produce organizational outputs” (Dinh et al., 2014, p. 37). Although this view is in line with extant research describing leadership as the attempt to evoke follower attitudes and actions in pursuit of collective goals (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), this assumption is a limitation as leaders do not always have their followers’ best interests at heart but can also be motivated stronger by their own needs (Conger, 1990). This holds especially true for organizational change when leaders often fear for their own status and position. Thus, organizational change may not always motivate leaders to engage in meaningful sensegiving that fosters a collective understanding within the organization but force their self-interest upon followers, leading to demotivation and dissatisfaction among employees (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012).

Third, this review was limited to literature in the field of sensegiving. However, sensegiving can also be understood as a form of communication (e.g., Balogun, 2006; Illia et al., 2011; Mantere et al., 2012). Therefore, the search criteria used for identifying articles might have excluded relevant literature from adjacent fields that deal with sensegiving from a different perspective. This is partially caused by the fact that sensegiving is not in all facets clearly distinguished from related concepts such as communication and power. For example,

some articles treat power as a form of exerting sensegiving (Drori & Ellis, 2011), whereas others consider power and sensegiving as different domains (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014). Here, a clear conceptualization of these related constructs is needed in order to fully embrace their meaning in the organizational context as well as the interrelations among each other.

Fourth, this review only deals with four moderators despite references to further moderators. The explanatory power of this study is thus limited to the discussed moderators and does not fully elaborate the role of moderators in leader sensegiving. However, the aim of this research was rather to elaborate on the role and effect of several moderators in depth instead of generally discussing a broad variety of moderators.

### **2.4.2 Implications for Practice**

The model and the deduced propositions also have implications for practice. First, leaders need to challenge their instinct when setting up sensegiving in times of organizational change. Their position in the organization and the associated legitimate power affects the choice of sensegiving strategies as well as the choice of language used in sensegiving. Therefore, organizations should account for these factors when setting up change management programs by challenging their leaders' sensegiving approach. On the one hand, communication departments could support individual managers with preparatory material that addresses potential weaknesses of managers in different hierarchical levels, e.g. by providing leaders with high legitimate power with information on how to adapt their sensegiving according to their employee needs by using a variety of different media including face-to-face communication (Klein, 1996). On the other hand, organizations could encourage or even enforce collaboration between managers of different hierarchical levels for the communication of change in order to compensate for each other's potential sensegiving pitfalls and increase the total amount of information within the organization (Kotter, 1995).

As leader communication aims both at informing employees and building a community (Elving, 2005), leaders should balance their communication in terms of what channels and media they use and what they communicate. Employees' sense of belonging depends on their appreciation of leaders' communication (Postmes, Tanis, & Wit, 2001) – as individuals are more likely to feel engaged by face-to-face communication, organizations and leaders should challenge their intuition when setting up sensegiving to ensure that no unconscious factors affect their choices but rather their active reflection about employees' needs and how best to address them.

Second, leaders should be aware that their sensegiving attempts can fail even though they were set up adequately in terms of strategies and language. The effect of leader sensegiving on employee sensemaking is moderated by factors which are mainly out of reach for leaders. During this phase, leaders need to closely monitor the effect of their sensegiving on employees in order to eventually carry out adjustments. For example, if leaders experience their sensegiving to become inadequate as subordinates proceed in their sensemaking, they should tailor their sensegiving accordingly. Organizations can support leaders in monitoring the effectiveness of their sensegiving, e.g. by implementing regular peer-meetings for leaders to facilitate the exchange of sensegiving best practices. Here, the interrelatedness of employee and leader sensemaking becomes visible (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010).

Third, this chapter emphasizes the importance of creating a 'sense of urgency' (Kotter, 1995, p. 60) at the very start of radical change initiatives by drawing on an emotion-based perspective to explain its relevance. If organizational members do not experience the change as significant and divergent, they will engage in less effortful top-down information processing (Schwarz & Clore, 2003). This mode is enforced by positive feelings, as individuals experiencing positive emotions have a stronger tendency to rely on existing schemas instead of creating new ones. Thus, establishing a sense of urgency can be achieved

by stressing the radicalness of the change initiative and its vast effects on the organization. This pictures a rather problematic status quo that encourages individuals to engage in the more effortful bottom-up information processing style.

### **2.4.3 Directions for Future Research**

This research opens up several avenues for future research. First, future research should aim at exploring the interactions between sensemaking and sensegiving. For example, it would be interesting to investigate how one's own sensemaking and sensegiving interact and affect each other. Here, potential studies should capture sensemaking as it evolves to examine the different influences from internal and external (e.g., one's own versus another person's sensegiving). For this kind of research, Maitlis and Christianson (2013) suggest methods that allow "recording sensemaking as it is accomplished in realtime" (p. 106), for example discourse or conversation analysis. Also, these methods would allow to study the effect of employees' sensegiving attempts on leaders' sensemaking. In general, this research avenue would enrich our understanding of sensegiving by demonstrating the interrelatedness of both processes within and between persons.

Second, future research could investigate leader sensegiving from a different angle and examine the real intentions leaders pursue when engaging in sensegiving for their employees. Especially in times of change, organizational members' personal and professional interests might differ from the organization's goals and actions (Salem, 2008). Therefore, leaders could execute sensegiving in order to convince employees of their own instead of the organization's opinion. Here, it would be interesting to understand under which conditions leaders are especially likely to follow their own as opposed to the organization's best interests and how this 'detrimental sensegiving' affects employee sensemaking. Using interviews and observations, researchers could investigate how leaders' sensegiving is dependent on their

own attitude towards change and how their opinion on the change affects their sensegiving and the eventual effect on employees.

Third, further moderators on the sensegiving process should be derived and investigated on a strong theoretical basis, for example building on Armenakis and Harris' (2009) readiness model that distinguishes between the internal and external context as influences on employees' change readiness. For example, Cornelissen and colleagues (2011) as well as Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang (2011) mention a leader's skill and character as another potential moderator, in line with Armenakis and Harris (2009) who mention the attributes of both change agents and change targets as relevant moderators without further exploring their effect. As sensegiving is a "fundamental leadership activity" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 22), other potential moderators could be transferred from the field of leadership research and examined with regard to their effect on leader sensegiving. Furthermore, according to the study performed by Lines (2007), expert power seems to play a significant effect for leader sensegiving. Future research should thus further investigate the effect of other power bases on sensegiving.

### **2.5 Conclusion of Chapter 2**

Sensegiving does not occur in a vacuum without influences from the external world but is embedded in a social and organizational context (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). It is related to the socio-cultural context (Rouleau, 2005) and affected by a variety of organizational and individual factors. However, the prevalent view still suggests that sensegivers have deliberate control of the sensegiving process. Although research has acknowledged the active role of employees in shaping others' sensemaking as well as in accepting or resisting sensegiving efforts (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013), contextual factors have been previously neglected. By building on a literature review and enriching the discussion with information-processing theory, this chapter demonstrates how moderators

affect the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving as well as the effect of leader sensegiving on employee sensemaking. The chapter reflects sensegiving moderators and suggests a stronger contextual perspective when investigating this process.

### **3 The Role of Construal Fit for Effective Leader Appeals<sup>2</sup>**

Communication is often considered a vital, if not the most important factor for successful change implementation (Aiken & Keller, 2009; Armenakis et al., 1993; Kotter, 2012; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). In times of change, leaders use communication to share their understanding of the change (Demers, Giroux, & Chreim, 2003) and affect how their followers think and act (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Indeed, extant research has demonstrated that leader communication is positively related to employees' readiness for change (Elving, 2005; Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991). However, the high failure rate of change initiatives is often attributed to employees' resistance to change (Burnes, 2011). Although unsuccessful change initiatives can be attributed to various reasons (Burnes & Jackson, 2011; Mohrman, Tenkasi, & Mohrman Jr., 2003), the role of leader communication for creating change readiness remains a challenging issue in the field of organizational behavior (Berson, Halevy, Shamir, & Erez, 2014).

Extant research has provided important insights on a variety of factors that are relevant for successful change communication. In general, previous studies have stressed the importance of the channel and the content: who the actors engaging in change communication are, and what content they should communicate (e.g., Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Goodman & Truss, 2004; Lewis, 1999; Smeltzer, 1991). In order to be successful, change communication should for example provide a rationale for the change (Klein, 1996), be clear and consistent in the message (Kramer, Dougherty, & Pierce, 2004) and motivate followers to participate in the change (Lewis, Schmisser, Stephens, & Weir, 2006). Regarding the channel of the communication, scholars and practitioners widely agree that it should be disseminated from

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter is based on a working paper by Kraft, Sparr, and Peus (2015b).

the top to the bottom, with top management initiating the communication and then cascading it down to team leaders (Kotter, 2012; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003).

Despite these findings, there is scant research on the interaction between the different success factors of change communication. Only lately, the interaction between message and context has received some interest in the research on cognitive abstraction (i.e., construal level) (van Houwelingen, Stam, & Giessner, 2015). For example, a conceptual study by Berson and colleagues (2014) claims that leader communication is especially effective if followers experience construal fit, that is, if the content and the situation coincide in terms of the degree of abstractness in the message and the distance experienced by the situation. In the field of change management, however, previous research has mainly substantiated our understanding of how to frame and communicate effective change communication, whereas little attention has been paid to the potential role of construal fit in fostering readiness for change among employees. This study therefore attempts to answer the following research question: *How do the content and context of leader appeals interact to increase the effect on employees' readiness for change?*

It contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, this study enhances our knowledge on successful change communication by investigating how construal fit in leader appeals affects followers' attitude towards change. Second, it substantiates our general understanding of the role of construal fit for the effectiveness of leader communication by extending and replicating the work of Berson and Halevy (2014) in the context of organizational change. Third, this study wishes to contribute to the literature on employees' readiness for change by exploring how change attitude is the result of a complex interaction between different factors perceived by organizational members.

### **3.1 Theoretical Background**

#### **3.1.1 Leader Communication and Employees' Attitude towards Change**

In times of organizational change, leader communication aims at creating a mutual understanding among employees (Elving, 2005). Although lateral communication between employees is vital for their understanding and interpretation of events (Balogun, 2006), previous studies have shown that communication from leaders is especially effective in influencing employee attitudes regarding the change initiative (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000). The positive effects of leader communication are vast, such as for example reducing employees' uncertainty (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998) and enhancing their job satisfaction (Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991). One explanation for these positive effects is that leader communication offers a framework which helps employees to understand and make sense of the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012), thus reducing the ambiguity and equivocality of the change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Leader communication is therefore a way to give sense to others in times of change, that is, the attempt to influence another person's sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Leader communication can be informal (e.g., casual chats) and formal (e.g., official announcements) (Goodman & Truss, 2004). Although both forms are equally important, change initiatives often require formal communication at certain points of time, which can be superior to informal communication due to its timeliness and consistency (Frahm & Brown, 2007). A first milestone for leaders' change communication is the formal announcement of the initiative (Demers et al., 2003; Lewis, Laster, & Kulkarni, 2013; Smeltzer, 1991). The announcement causes a first shift in employees' understanding of their organizational environment (Isabella, 1990). By emphasizing how and why the organization has to change (Mills, 2010; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012), leaders can positively affect employees' readiness for change (Elving, 2005). Change readiness is the "evaluation of the individual and

organizational capacity for making a successful change, the need for a change, and the benefits the organization and its members can gain from a change (Choi, 2011, p. 488) and is mainly created through change messages (Armenakis et al., 1993). It is conceptualized by five factors (Armenakis, Bernerth, Pitts, & Walker, 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2009) representing different facets of change readiness: (1) *discrepancy* (understanding for the change initiative's necessity), (2) *appropriateness* (belief that the intended change is adequate to overcome the current problems), (3) *efficacy* (conviction that those involved in the change have the capabilities to successfully implement the change), (4) *personal valence* (individual's belief in the benefits of the change for oneself), (5) *principal support* (belief that informal and formal leaders are supportive of the change). In order to advance our understanding of the circumstances under which leader appeals are especially effective in creating readiness for change among employees, the current research will draw on construal-level theory of psychological distance

### **3.1.2 Leader Communication, Psychological Distance, and Construal Fit**

Lately, leader communication has received some interest in literature with regard to the circumstances under which different appeals are especially effective. For example, Berson and Halevy (2014) demonstrated that leader communication is especially effective if followers experience construal fit – when the distance communicated in the message matches the distance of the situation (Berson & Halevy, 2014).

Construal-level theory describes the link between psychological distance and individuals' mental representation ('construal'). Its basic premise is that more distant objects or events will be processed more abstractly than objects or events that feel close (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Trope and Liberman (2010) distinguish between four dimensions of psychological distance: temporal (how soon an event will occur), spatial (how far away something happens), hypothetical (how probable an event is) and social (how similar to

oneself one experiences another person). Psychological distance changes the way individuals process information, from focusing on rather abstract features (high-level construal) to rather concrete and incidental details (low-level construal) (Trope & Liberman, 2003). In times of organizational change, leader communication about the change is a construal of the change initiative: it conveys less information than direct experience and can be more or less abstract depending on its content (van Houwelingen et al., 2015). For example, leader appeals can be more or less abstract in terms of the temporal distance (Trope & Liberman, 2003):

communication about change which is about to happen in the distant future (e.g., next year) is more abstract than communication about a change that starts tomorrow. Construal fit arises when the level of psychological distance in the situation matches the abstractness of the construal (e.g., an event occurring in the distant future is communicated by someone very different from oneself) and enhances followers' psychological engagement with leader communication. The first empirical study demonstrating this relationship was conducted by Berson and Halevy (2014) who showed that construal fit between leader communication and leader-follower social distance leads to higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, social bonding as well as group commitment and participation. In a conceptual study, Berson and colleagues (2014) furthermore discussed the effect of concrete versus abstract leader behavior (goal-setting versus visions) on follower motivation with similar implications.

Based on construal-level theory, it can therefore be assumed that employees experiencing a high distance to their leaders (e.g., the leader being in a distant hierarchical position in the organization) will have a higher change readiness after abstract leader appeals than those experiencing a low distance to their leaders (e.g., the leader being close in the hierarchy). I argue that construal fit between the message and the content of leader appeals has a positive effect on employees' change readiness.

H1: The effectiveness of leader appeals is determined by follower construal level, such that (a) appeals with high abstractness lead to higher readiness for change if employees experience high social distance towards their leaders, and (b) appeals with low abstractness lead to higher readiness for change if employees experience low social distance to their leaders.

Two experimental online studies were conducted to test the hypothesis. Both studies were based on a 2 (social distance: high vs. low) x 2 (abstractness in leader appeal: high vs. low) between-subjects design.

### **3.2 Study 1: Methods and Results**

#### **3.2.1 Method**

The first study was an experimental online scenario study conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The experiment was based on a 2 (social distance: high vs. low) x 2 (abstractness in leader appeal: high vs. low) between-subjects design.

**Participants.** Participants were recruited on MTurk and were adequately compensated for taking part in the survey. Several studies have demonstrated the high quality of MTurk samples for gathering reliable and representable data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013; Mason & Suri, 2012). Similar to other studies using Amazon MTurk (Berson & Halevy, 2014), the survey was restricted to participants who had an approval rate of 95% or higher for past assignments. Initially, 389 surveys were completed. 88 participants were excluded as they failed to pass at least one of the three quality check questions (e.g., “Please answer this question to a ‘fully disagree’”). The final sample comprised 301 participants with an average age of 34.00 years ( $SD= 10.47$ ), 54.2% male. 47.8% of the participants held at least a bachelor’s degree. All participants had previous work experience in organizations.

**Procedure.** The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in the experimental design: (1) high social distance, high abstractness, (2) high social distance, low abstractness, (3) low social distance, high abstractness and (4) low social distance, low high abstractness. At the beginning of the experiment, all participants read a scenario, describing an organization and its recent challenges in the industry which necessitate organizational change (see Appendix A1). Participants were asked to imagine working for this organization. To ensure the scenario was credible and realistic, it was based on a change management case study from Harvard Business School (Gulati, Wagonfeld, & Silvestri, 2014). The name of the organization was not used in order to avoid any bias. After the scenario description, participants read about their position in the company and a vision from a board member on the upcoming organizational change. In the end, the dependent variable was administered.

**Social Distance Manipulation.** Participants were instructed on their role in the organization, implying either high or low social distance to the management board (see Appendix A2). In the low social distance condition, participants were told they held the position of a senior vice president, overseeing 6,000 employees and directly reporting to the management board on a regular basis. In the high social distance condition, participants were informed that they were an employee without managerial responsibility who reported to their direct team leader. The text was supported by an organizational chart depicting the own position in the company, either being on the level furthest away from the management board (high social distance) or on the level below the management board (low social distance).

The social distance manipulation in was pre-tested in an online survey among a working population of 21 persons,  $M_{age} = 33.88$ ,  $SD = 10.18$ , 11 female (52.4%). Participants were randomly assigned to either the high- or low-social distance condition and were asked to evaluate their sense of social distance on a five point Likert-scale (1 = low social distance, 5 =

high social distance). An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the level of perceived social distance in the high and low condition. Participants in the high social distance condition perceived their level of social distance significantly higher ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) than individuals in the low social distance condition ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ),  $t(19) = -2.19$ ,  $p = .041$ .

**Abstractness Manipulation.** To manipulate the level of abstractness in the leader appeals, I used a shortened version of the original speech from the Harvard case study that the scenario was based on. The original speech is available online (Tillman, 2011). The speech describes the purpose of the upcoming change (e.g., accelerating the impact made to customers) as well as its guiding principles (e.g., simplifying the tools and systems used in the organization). This shortened speech was manipulated with either high or low abstractness (see Appendix A3). As one form of psychological distance is temporal (Trope & Liberman, 2010), the level of abstractness was manipulated by varying the temporal distance mentioned in the speech both in terms of its grammar (e.g., using present vs. future tense) and the references to the future (e.g. “We now need to prepare ourselves for what’s happening *in the future*, as you will see our organization make a number of targeted moves *in the coming years* and as we move into the *next decade*.” for the high abstractness condition versus “We now need to prepare ourselves for what’s happening *tomorrow*, as you will see our organization make a number of targeted moves *in the coming weeks* and as we move into the *next year*” for the low abstractness condition).

The two leader appeal versions were pre-tested in the same sample as the social distance manipulation. One participant did not complete the part on the temporal manipulation and was therefore excluded from further analysis. Participants indicated their agreement to the statement “The change is happening soon” on a five point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). There was a significant effect for temporal distance,

$t(18) = -2.32, p = .033$ , with participants rating the leader appeal with high temporal distance as being more distant ( $M = 2.20, SD = 1.62$ ) than individuals confronted with the low temporal distance manipulation ( $M = 3.90, SD = 1.66$ ).

**Dependent Variable.** Readiness for change using Holt and colleagues' (2007) change readiness scale. Participants indicated their agreement to the different items on a five point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale measures readiness for change using four sub-scales: appropriateness, change efficacy, management support, personal benefits. Sample items are for example "I think that the organization will benefit from this change" (appropriateness) or "Our senior leaders have encouraged all of us to embrace this change" (management support). As employees' work behavior and attitude is strongly influenced by leaders' perceived character (Lines, Selart, Espedal, & Johansen, 2005), I measured and controlled the results for leader characteristics in order to eliminate any effects related to perceived character differences, eventually caused by the social distance manipulation. I used Heilman, Block, and Lucas' (1992) measure of interpersonal characteristics to assess the character of the leader announcing the change. It assesses an individual's character on five items, namely responsibility, trustworthiness, cooperativeness, helpfulness, good versus bad co-worker, tested as a semantic differential.

### 3.2.2 Results

**Manipulation Checks.** Both manipulations were effective. There was a significant effect on the social distance manipulation on participants' perceived social distance. Participants in the high social distance group perceived more social distance ( $M=4.11, SD=1.25$ ) than those in the low social distance group ( $M=2.39, SD=0.84$ ),  $t(299)=14.03, p<.001$ . There was also a significant effect of the abstractness manipulation on the perceived starting point of the organizational change, an indicator for the level of abstractness at which the appeal is being processed. Participants reading the high-distance appeal, expected the

change to happen later ( $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ) than participants reading the low-distance appeal ( $M=4.49$ ,  $SD=0.76$ ),  $t(299)=-11.50$ ,  $p<.001$ .

**Readiness for Change.** First of all, the correlation between interpersonal characteristics of the leader, communicating the change and change readiness was tested ( $r=.65$ ,  $p<.001$ ). In order to exclude effects from different leader evaluations as measured by interpersonal characteristics, interpersonal characteristics was used as a control variable for all following analyses.

I conducted a two-way MANCOVA with the two experimental conditions (social distance, level of abstractness), the covariate leader characteristics and the four dependent variables, constituting the readiness for change scale: appropriateness, personally beneficial, change efficacy, management support. Multivariate effects were significant for social distance,  $F(4, 293) = 2.96$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $\eta^2 = .039$  and the social distance x abstractness interaction,  $F(4, 293) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .047$ ,  $\eta^2 = .032$ , thus confirming hypothesis 1. Multivariate effects were not significant for temporal distance,  $F(4, 293) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .166$ ,  $\eta^2 = .022$ .

Table 2 shows the univariate analyses for social distance and abstractness as well as their interaction, in Table 3 means and standard deviations are presented. At the subscale level, univariate analyses were significant for the effect of social distance on ‘personally beneficial’,  $F(1, 296) = 9.69$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .032$ , with individuals in the high social distance condition, experiencing the change as more personally beneficial,  $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .06$ , than those in the low social distance condition,  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = .06$ . None of the other sub-variables showed significant effects: ‘management support’  $F(1, 296) = .52$ ,  $p = .470$ ,  $\eta^2 = .002$ , ‘appropriateness’  $F(1, 296) = .47$ ,  $p = .492$ ,  $\eta^2 = .002$ , ‘change efficacy’  $F(1, 296) = .75$ ,  $p = .388$ ,  $\eta^2 = .003$ .

As mentioned above, the multivariate effects of the interaction between social distance and level of abstractness on readiness for change were significant. However, univariate

analysis revealed that interaction remains only significant for the sub-variable ‘management support’,  $F(1, 296) = 8.75, p = .003, \eta^2 = .029$ . Individuals in the high social distance condition considered their management as more supportive after a high temporal distance appeal,  $M = 4.02, SD = .06$ , than after a low temporal distance appeal,  $M = 3.92, SD = .06$ . Individuals in the low social distance condition rated ‘management support’ higher after an appeal with low abstractness,  $M = 4.13, SD = .06$ , than after a highly abstract appeal,  $M = 3.89, SD = .06$ . There were no significant interaction effects for the other sub-variables: ‘appropriateness’,  $F(1, 296) = .65, p = .422, \eta^2 = .002$ , ‘change efficacy’,  $F(1, 296) = .032, p = .857, \eta^2 < .001$ , ‘personally beneficial’,  $F(1, 296) = .81, p = .370, \eta^2 = .003$ . In summary, the hypothesis could be confirmed using multivariate analysis and follow-up analyses showed that the effect was mainly driven by the subscale ‘management support’.

Table 2: Study 1: Message Abstractness (High vs. Low), Social Distance (High vs. Low) and Message Abstractness x Social Distance Interaction

Univariate F and p Values

	Appropriateness		Change efficacy		Management support		Personally beneficial	
	F	p	F	p	F	p	F	p
Message abstractness	6.23	.013	1.59	.208	1.26	.262	1.29	.257
Social distance	.47	.492	.75	.388	.52	.470	9.69	.002
Message abstractness * social distance	.65	.422	.03	.857	8.75	.003	.81	.370

*Table 3: Study 1: Means and Standard Deviations of the Subscales of Readiness for Change for Low and High Message Abstractness and Social Distance Groups*

	High social distance				Low social distance			
	High abstractness		Low abstractness		High abstractness		Low abstractness	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Appropriateness	3.75	.63	3.84	.58	3.90	.55	4.13	.57
Change efficacy	3.51	.52	3.58	.43	3.55	.41	3.63	.43
Management support	3.96	.62	3.85	.57	3.94	.53	4.21	.53
Personally beneficial	3.48	.83	3.64	.72	3.45	.78	3.51	.78

### 3.3 Study 2: Methods and Results

The second experiment was designed to replicate and extend the findings of study 1. Whilst all other factors have been held constant for the replication, some adjustments were made to the manipulations in order to see whether the effects from study 1 can be replicated using different types of manipulations.

#### 3.3.1 Method

An experimental online scenario study was conducted on Clickworker, the German version of Amazon MTurk. The experiment was a 2 (social distance: high vs. low) x 2 (level of abstractness in leader appeal: high vs. low) between-subjects design.

**Participants.** Participants were recruited on Clickworker and were adequately compensated for taking part in the survey. From 271 completed surveys, 53 participants who failed to pass at least one of our three quality check questions (e.g., “Please answer this question to a ‘full disagree’”) had to be excluded. The final sample comprised 218 participants with an average age of 36.31 years ( $SD= 11.79$ ), 54.1% female. 33.9% of the participants held at least a bachelor’s degree. All participants had previous work experience in organizations.

**Procedure.** The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in the experimental design: (1) high social distance, high abstractness, (2) high social distance, low abstractness, (3) low social distance, high abstractness and (4) low social distance, low abstractness. The sequence of the experiment was identical with the first study, starting off with the basic scenario from study 1 translated into German (see Appendix A4).

**Social Distance Manipulation.** As opposed to study 1, social distance was manipulated by keeping participants’ role in the organization constant and changing the hierarchical level of the leader (see Appendix A5). A similar approach had been chosen in Berson and Halevy’s (2014) study on hierarchical distance and follower motivation. For both

manipulations, participants were instructed that they were employees in the organization without managerial responsibility. In the low distance setting, they were directly addressed by their team leader, with whom they work together on a daily basis and share the office. In the high distance setting, they received along with all other employees an email from the CEO, whom they only knew from major townhall meetings with several thousand participants. Both manipulations were supported with a figure outlining the participants' own role as well as the role of their leader.

The social distance manipulation was pre-tested in an online survey among 28 persons,  $M_{age} = 26.43$ ,  $SD = 8.75$ , 21 male (75.0%). Participants were randomly assigned to either the high- or low-social distance condition and were asked to evaluate their sense of social distance on a five point Likert-scale (1 = low social distance, 5 = high social distance). An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the level of perceived social distance in the high and low condition. Participants in the high social distance condition perceived their level of social distance significantly higher ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than individuals in the low social distance condition ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ),  $t(26) = -7.3$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Abstractness Manipulation.** As in study 1, the leader appeals were based on a shortened version of the original speech (Tillman, 2011). However, the level of abstractness was not only altered by differences in the temporal distance, but also in terms of the content (see Appendix A6). Following Berson and Halevy's (2014) manipulation of abstract versus concrete action calls, I included concrete measures in the low abstract leader appeal, for example the "consolidation of production in two areas under the leadership of two group leaders" or the "reorganization of our worldwide presence in three areas: (1) USA, (2) EMEA, (3) Asia-Pacific". All examples were actual measures that the company described in the case study performed during the reorganization (Gulati et al., 2014). Furthermore, the low distance version stated concrete ways to participate in the change initiative (e.g., "participate in one of

our workshops” or “tell your supervisor about your ideas”) and appreciated the challenges of the employees in their daily business (e.g., “I know that your daily business is very challenging.”). These features constitute concrete leader appeals and focus on low-level construal (Berson & Halevy, 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2010). By contrast, the high-abstract leader appeal only mentioned high-level measures, such as “we will take bold steps and make tough decisions” or “we will make it easier for you to work here”. These examples are characteristics of abstract leader appeals and evoke high-level construals (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The two versions were pre-tested among 33 participants,  $M_{age} = 33.94$ ,  $SD = 13.07$ , 12 male (36.4%). Participants indicated their agreement to the statement “The leader mentioned concrete measures for the change initiative” on a five point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). There was a significant effect for message abstractness,  $t(31) = -7.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ., with participants rating the leader appeal with high abstractness as less concrete ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) than individuals confronted with the low abstractness manipulation ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ).

**Dependent Variable.** Again, I used Holt and colleagues' (2007) change readiness scale. Participants indicated their agreement to the different items on a five point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). As in study 1, I controlled for leader characteristics to exclude any effects related to perceived character differences using Heilman et al.'s (1992) measure of interpersonal characteristics.

As no German version of the readiness for change scale was available at the time of the data collection, the scale had to be translated into German language. The translation was conducted using the standard version of back-translation by Brislin (1970). First, each item was translated by two bilingual speakers who were not familiar with the scale from English into German. Second, two different bilingual speakers translated these items back into

English. Based on the differences between the original version and these back-translations, few minor adjustments were made to the German versions of the scales.

### 3.3.2 Results

**Manipulation Checks.** Both manipulations were effective. The social distance manipulation had a significant effect on participants' perceived social distance between themselves and the board member. In the high distance group, participants perceived more social distance ( $M= 1.49$ ,  $SD= 0.90$ ) than those in the low social distance group ( $M= 3.80$ ,  $SD= 1.10$ ),  $t(216)=17.04$ ,  $p<.001$ . Also the level of abstractness in the leader appeal was successfully manipulated. Participants reading the high-abstract appeal evaluated the vision as significantly more abstract ( $M= 3.52$ ,  $SD= 1.11$ ) than participants reading the low-abstract appeal ( $M= 2.50$ ,  $SD= 1.03$ ),  $t(216)=7.01$ ,  $p<.001$ .

**Readiness for Change.** Again, I started with testing the correlation between interpersonal characteristics of the leader communicating the change and change readiness ( $r=.66$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and controlled for this variable in all subsequent analysis.

As for study 1, a two-way MANCOVA was conducted with the two experimental conditions (social distance, level of abstractness), the covariate leader characteristics and the four dependent variables from readiness for change (appropriateness, personally beneficial, change efficacy, management support). Multivariate effects were not significant for social distance,  $F(4, 210) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .070$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ , level of abstractness in the leader appeal  $F(4, 210) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .088$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ , or the social distance x abstractness distance interaction,  $F(4, 210) = .71$ ,  $p = .583$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , thus rejecting hypothesis 1. Table 4 depicts the univariate analyses for social distance and abstractness as well as their interaction, Table 5 shows means and standard deviations.

At the subscale level, univariate analyses was significant for the effect of social distance on ‘appropriateness’,  $F(1, 213) = 5.02, p = .026, \eta^2 = .02$ , with individuals in the socially close condition rating the change initiative as less appropriate ( $M = 3.46, SD = .46$ ) than those in the socially distant condition ( $M = 3.54, SD = .49$ ). Also, the main effect of social distance yielded an  $F$  ratio of  $F(1, 213) = 6.85, p = .009, \eta^2 = .03$  on ‘management support’, indicating the management was considered significantly more supportive in the social distance condition ( $M = 3.72, SD = .68$ ) than in the socially close condition ( $M = 3.59, SD = .61$ ). There were no significant main effects of social distance on ‘change efficacy’ ( $F(1, 213) = 1.03, p = .313, \eta^2 = .01$ ) and ‘personal benefits’ ( $F(1, 213) = 2.02, p = .157, \eta^2 = .01$ ).

Also, univariate analyses revealed two significant main effects of message abstractness on the subscale level. The analyses yielded a main effect for ‘appropriateness’,  $F(1, 213) = 5.35, p = .022, \eta^2 = .03$ , with individuals reading an abstract vision rating the change initiative as significantly less appropriate ( $M = 3.39, SD = .53$ ) than individuals who received a concrete vision ( $M = 3.61, SD = .40$ ). There was also a significant main effect of message abstractness on ‘management support’,  $F(1, 213) = 4.69, p = .031, \eta^2 = .02$ , such that individuals confronted with a concrete message considered management to be significantly more supportive ( $M = 3.80, SD = .54$ ) than individuals reading an abstract message ( $M = 3.51, SD = .72$ ). There were no significant main effects for ‘change efficacy’ ( $F(1, 213) = .001, p = .978, \eta^2 = .000$ ) or ‘personal benefits’ ( $F(1, 213) = .86, p = .356, \eta^2 = .004$ ).

The interaction effect between social distance and message abstractness was non-significant for all four subscales ‘appropriateness’,  $F(1, 213) = .76, p = .385, \eta^2 = .004$ , ‘management support’,  $F(1, 213) = .41, p = .524, \eta^2 = .002$ , ‘change efficacy’,  $F(1, 213) = .22, p = .643, \eta^2 = .001$ , and ‘personal benefits’,  $F(1, 213) = .164, p = .201, \eta^2 = .01$ .

*Table 4: Study 2: Message Abstractness (High vs. Low), Social Distance (High vs. Low) and Message Abstractness x Social Distance Interaction*

Univariate F and p Values

	Appropriateness		Change efficacy		Management support		Personally beneficial	
	F	p	F	p	F	p	F	p
Message abstractness	5.35	.022	.001	.978	4.69	.031	.86	.356
Social distance	5.02	.026	1.03	.313	6.85	.009	2.02	.157
Message abstractness * social distance	.76	.385	.22	.643	.41	.524	1.64	.201

*Table 5: Study 2: Means and Standard Deviations of the Subscales of Readiness for Change for Low and High Message Abstractness and Social Distance Groups*

	High social distance				Low social distance			
	High abstractness		Low abstractness		High abstractness		Low abstractness	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Appropriateness	3.44	.57	3.63	.39	3.35	.49	3.59	.40
Change efficacy	3.59	.68	3.75	.54	3.63	.57	3.68	.64
Management support	3.57	.77	3.84	.58	3.45	.68	3.75	.48
Personally beneficial	3.16	.84	3.36	.76	3.26	.75	3.15	.80

### 3.4 Discussion

Although various studies have investigated how change should be communicated in order to positively influence employees' readiness for change (e.g., Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Hill, Seo, Kang, & Taylor, 2012; Madsen, Miller, & John, 2005), previous findings have mainly disregarded the interaction between the content and context of change communication. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate how employees' change readiness is affected by construal fit between the content of the message and leader-follower social distance. The hypothesis suggested that construal fit between the abstractness of the leader appeal and the experienced social distance between leader and follower positively affects employees' attitude towards change.

In study 1, multivariate analysis confirmed this hypothesis. However, univariate analyses only revealed a significant effect on one of the sub-dimensions of change readiness. The data showed that construal fit between leader-follower social distance and message abstractness in the leader appeal only leads to higher ratings for management support: participants experience management as more supportive if an organizational change in the distant future is communicated by a top manager and a change in the near future by a direct supervisor. This finding is in line with previous knowledge about positive consequences of fit into the work context (Berson & Halevy, 2014; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof-Brown, Zimmermann, & Johnson, 2005; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). Fit in the organizational context (e.g., person-organization fit or person-supervisor fit) is positively related to various outcome variables relevant for organizational success, such as job performance, satisfaction and commitment. In times of change, however, construal fit between temporal and social distance only seems to affect followers' evaluation of their leaders. Leaders' change communication "is a highly distinctive and respected way for leaders to build an authentic

rapport with their organizations” (Roos, 2013, p. 557). Thus, employees believe their leaders to truly support the change under construal fit.

However, these results could not be replicated in a second study. Here, no significant interaction effects on any of the subscales of readiness for change could be shown. One explanation for this could be the differences in the manipulation used in both studies. For the replication study, the manipulation of social distance and message abstractness was changed in order to investigate whether the effects persist under different manipulation conditions. Social distance was manipulated by holding the role of the participant constant (employee of the organization) whilst changing the role of the communicator (board member versus team leader). The abstractness of the message was manipulated by mentioning concrete versus abstract change measures and naming concrete versus abstract ways to participate in the change, in line with previous research in this field (Berson & Halevy, 2014). One could argue that effect of construal fit on the perception of management support shown in the first study could be caused by underlying effects of power perceptions of participants rather than differences in the social distance. Thus, construal fit might only have a positive effect on employees’ readiness for change if they experience different hierarchical levels for themselves, as opposed to different communicators of the change message. In the first study, the participant received information about the change as a simple employee versus a top manager. Here, the results demonstrated that construal fit fosters the readiness for change. However, these results could also be due to differences in the level of perceived power of participants. Different hierarchical positions in organizations also imply different power perceptions (Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2013). Therefore, the effect in study 1 could have been mainly driven by different power experiences and not by differences in the perception of social distance.

Furthermore, neither study showed a significant interaction effect of social distance and message abstractness on the three other subscales of readiness for change. Construal fit does not affect employees' appraisal of personal or general benefits of the change initiative: the other readiness variables refer either to the follower him- or herself (self-efficacy and personal benefits) or to the change initiative (appropriateness). Here, the fit does not seem to have an effect on the employees in terms of feeling more capable to embrace the change, evaluating the change as more beneficial for oneself or seeing the change as appropriate for the organization. One explanation could be that although construal fit increases the credibility of messages (Hansen & Wanke, 2010), this only accounts for the credibility of the communicator with regard to change communication. The credibility of messages concerning the effects of the change for oneself or the organization may not be enhanced by the experience of construal fit and thus not lead to a higher rating on these readiness dimensions.

Nevertheless, the study entails several interesting implications. First, it contributes to our understanding of construal-level theory by investigating the role of construal fit in shaping attitudes in an organizational context (Hansen & Wanke, 2010; Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010). The study provides first indications for the assumption that construal fit can enhance the perception of management support among employees under certain conditions. Berson and Halevy (2014) linked the construal fit between communication type and hierarchical distance to higher organizational and group commitment as well as social bonding. Due to the mixed results in the two studies, this research does not fully support the positive effects found by Berson and Halevy (2014), but offers first findings that should be extended in future research to enhance our understanding of the effects of construal fit for change communication.

Furthermore, an interesting finding, though not represented beforehand in the hypothesis, is the main effect of level of abstractness in the leader appeal on the perception of

the appropriateness of the change. This effect could be shown in both studies. Thus, a concrete message always leads to a higher perception of change appropriateness among employees. This suggests that individuals have a higher likelihood of accepting an organizational change that is described in concrete versus abstract terms. Here, the way concreteness or abstractness is expressed does not affect the perception of appropriateness. For example, in study 1 the level of abstractness was manipulated using different references to the future, thus describing a change that is happening in the near versus distant future. In study 2, high abstractness was established by high-level descriptions of the change itself and the ways to participate, whereas low abstractness was achieved by naming specific measures and pointing out concrete ways to participate. One explanation for this effect could be the aspiration of individuals to obtain cognitive consistency, which is defined as concordant attitudes, beliefs or behaviors (Festinger, 1957). If employees learn about a change initiative which they refuse, they will experience “an aversive state known as cognitive dissonance” (Kahle, 1984, p. 11). In order to handle this dissonance, they can either attempt to alter the initiative or their attitude towards it. The sooner the change is supposed to happen, the less likely it is for organizational members to change the initiative. Therefore, individuals will be motivated to retain cognitive consistency by adopting a more positive attitude towards the initiative (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 1996) as they experience the inevitability of the change.

### **3.4.1 Limitations**

Despite these findings, this research entails a number of limitations. A considerable limitation of this chapter is the fact that the results regarding the interaction effect from the first study could not be replicated in a second study. Replication studies are necessary to increase confidence in results, accumulate understanding and identify methodological bias in the original research (Makel & Plucker, 2014; Spector, Johnson, & Young, 2015). Thus, the

results from study 1 have to be considered keeping in mind that they might have been driven by factors that are beyond the scope of this study. Thus, the explanatory power of the results regarding the interaction of message abstractness and social distance in the first study is somehow lessened to the extent that this study does not provide full explanation on the underlying effects of these results.

Following this limitation, this research is limited by the usage of different manipulation material in the first and second study. Although both studies still contribute to our understanding of the role of construal fit in leader communication, the different materials also provide room for speculation on why the results in the two studies do not fully coincide. Thus, the effect of construal fit on management support in the first study might have been caused by the implicit manipulation of power among participants, whereas the second study manipulated only social distance and held the position of the participant constant. Therefore, the results of both studies can only be compared keeping in mind the different manipulations used.

A third limitation concerns the experimental design of the study. Although experiments allow to derive at specific statements about cause and effect of different variables (Kantowitz, Roediger, & Elmes, 2015), they always run the risk of artificiality and limited transferability to the real world. Also, especially online experiments only allow very little influence on the motivation and attention of participants. Although the quality checks aimed at excluding inattentive participants, other participants with significant experience in taking surveys could have passed the checks whilst still not paying full attention.

### **3.4.2 Implications for Practice**

This research also has implications for change practitioners. First, the study provides some further indications for the importance of using various sources when communicating change (Goodman & Truss, 2004; Lewis, 1999; Smeltzer, 1991). When preparing a change

initiative, careful consideration needs to be given to the communicators of the change messages, as different sources might lead to different effects. Both studies indicated positive effects of senior management communication on different dimensions of readiness for change. This demonstrates that organizations should draw on various hierarchical levels in order to communicate change effectively. This is in line with previous findings on the importance of having different sources for change communication (Kotter, 1995), preferably through a cascading communication strategy from the top to the bottom. For example, Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, and Irmer (2007) found that communication by direct supervisors is preferred for implementation-related and job-relevant information, whereas communication from senior management typically provides more strategic information.

Furthermore, the study challenges previous assumptions among practitioners that “a timetable of three to five years, typical for the overall aspiration of a transformation, can seem too distant for managers and employees” (Isern & Pung, 2007, p. 7). The first study, that manipulated abstractness using high versus low temporal distance to the initiative, demonstrates that announcing a change shortly before its start (that is, high abstractness in the content of the message) can be beneficial in terms of employees’ evaluation of its appropriateness. However, practitioners need to balance the risk of rumors caused by delayed communication (Smeltzer, 1991) with the risk of creating a feeling of inappropriateness when communicated too early. A possible strategy to account for both risks could be to explicitly address the appropriateness of the change when communicating at early stages of the initiative. One could do so by outlining where the organization is currently standing, where it aims to be and how the change will allow to achieve this aspiration, thus addressing both the discrepancy between today and tomorrow and the change’s appropriateness in building this bridge (Armenakis & Harris, 2002).

### **3.4.3 Directions for Future Research**

This research opens several avenues for future research. First of all, in order to fully understand the differing results from the first and second study of this research, further studies on the above mentioned effects are needed. Here, it would be especially useful to conduct studies with both types of manipulations in order to fully understand the drivers of the effects. These experimental studies could be complemented by a correlational study with data gained from the field, for example companies undergoing organizational change in order to overcome the shortcomings of experimental studies. A supplementary correlational study would increase the robustness of the experimental data and strengthen our understanding of the effect of construal fit on readiness for change.

Future research could also aim at broadening our understanding of psychological distance and readiness for change by investigating other forms of distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010). This study used social distance and the general abstractness of the leader appeal to outline how construal fit affects attitudes towards change. For example, other studies could investigate if the results withstand, if leader appeals are manipulated with regard to their hypothetical distance, meaning that the communicated change is happening with a high, versus a low probability. Another manipulation could entail spatial distance, meaning that changes are announced by a leader with the same social distance to participants, but differing geographical proximity, for example being located in the same city as the employees versus in a different country (e.g., Henderson, Fujita, Trope, & Liberman, 2006).

### **3.5 Conclusion of Chapter 3**

Leader communication has been at the center of attention of scholars in the field of leadership, communication and organizational change. However, few studies have yet paid attention to the role of construal fit for leader communication in times of organizational change. Only lately, researchers have started to investigate how the experience of

psychological distance leads to different effects in follower attitude and behavior (e.g., Berson & Halevy, 2014). This study aimed at extending our understanding of leader communication under the effects of construal fit by investigating how it affects employees' attitude towards change. Positive employee attitudes are at the core of change management, as they lay the foundation for successful change initiatives. Building on construal-level theory, I outlined how construal fit between message and situational attributes may help to increase individuals' perception of management support for a change. However, this effect could not be replicated using different manipulations, thus showing a clear need for further research to understand the underlying mechanics.

## **4 The Interaction between Leader Sensegiving and Employee Sensemaking<sup>3</sup>**

Complex and stressful situations such as organizational change (Wisse & Sleebos, 2015) trigger sensemaking among organizational members (Maitlis, 2005) as they try to redefine their new environment (Fairhurst, 2009, p. 1614). Sensemaking evolves over the course of change (Maitlis et al., 2013; Weick, 2012), with each stage having different predominant needs and interpretive tasks (Isabella, 1990; Kim et al., 2011). Leaders attempt to account for these differing needs by continuously striving to convey relevant meaning to employees. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) labeled this effort sensegiving and defined it as ‘the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality’ (p. 442). Relevant sensegiving can facilitate the production of shared accounts among organizational members (Mantere et al., 2012, 2012), which aids to foster a positive attitude towards change (Stensaker et al., 2008). Leaders need to make sense of employees’ sensemaking needs and integrate these needs in their sensegiving in order to provide ‘convincing answers’ (Kim et al., 2011, p. 1674). Thus, both processes are characterized by a dynamic interplay where they affect and form each other, with leaders’ accounting for employees’ sensemaking needs and employees’ incorporating and challenging of leaders’ sensegiving.

Yet, the link between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving over the course of a change process is missing: it remains vague how leaders integrate specific employees’ sensemaking needs in their sensegiving at different phases of a change process. Our understanding of the variety of sensegiving strategies established in previous studies (Balogun

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter is based on a working paper by Kraft, Sparr, and Peus (2015c), currently under review at the Journal of Business and Psychology

& Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Stensaker et al., 2008) does not provide answers about the particular strategies leaders choose in order to account for the different employee needs across the phases of a change process. However, if leaders want to affect employees' perception of the change, they need to legitimize their perspective by using particular framing strategies (Foldy et al., 2008) that target employees' specific needs in each phase. Thus, investigating sensemaking and sensegiving across different change phases enriches our understanding of the interactive nature of leaders' and followers' actions (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Building on qualitative interviews with employees and leaders, this study aims at demonstrating (1) the prevalent demands employee sensemaking places for leader sensegiving over the course of a change process and (2) the predominant modes of leader sensegiving in different change phases as a response to these needs. Following calls to include process thinking (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010a), this research contributes to extant literature by investigating the interplay between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving over different change phases. I illustrate how employees' sensemaking needs are incorporated by leaders who respond to these needs using specific framing strategies in each phase. This perspective also enriches our understanding of sensegiving as a central leadership activity by 'reversing the lens' (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014, p. 97) and including followers' perspective in the research design. This research is also highly relevant for practitioners as it provides concrete insights in how to tailor leader sensegiving to phase-specific employee sensemaking needs which differ over the course of change.

#### **4.1 Theoretical Background**

Organizations are constantly facing change, an ongoing process with a stream of interactions among organizational members (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). They experience both continuous change, a reaction to "everyday contingencies, breakdowns, exceptions,

opportunities, and unintended consequences” (Orlikowski, 1995, p. 65) as well as episodic change, defined as more radical initiatives such as technology change or internal changes in key personnel (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Especially during episodic change, creating and sustaining a common understanding of the environment is critical (Weick & Roberts, 1993). This can be attained through a process called sensemaking (Weick, 1995), where employees attempt to achieve a ‘meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended change’ (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). During sensemaking, individuals notice and extract cues from their environment, interpret these hints to develop an organized sense of the situation upon which they act (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). Thus, sensemaking is both about thinking and acting (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012): “people organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact that sense back to the world” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410).

Especially in times of change with the multitude of diverging interests at stake, individuals try to deliberately affect another person’s sensemaking towards a specific direction through sensegiving (Fiss & Zajac, 2006). Although sensegiving occurs on various hierarchical levels (Balogun, 2006), leaders are institutionally empowered for sensegiving (Brown & Humphreys, 2003) as they act as official representatives of the organization and have privileged access to internal information (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). The desired outcome of sensegiving is a “cognitive shift” (Foldy et al., 2008, p. 514), a change in the thinking and the perception of others. However, the active nature of sensemaking suggests that individuals can also resist sensegiving efforts (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013): sensemaking is not only about ‘reception’ nor is sensegiving always about ‘action’. Both concepts are interrelated (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and affect each other as they occur. Therefore, leaders must frame their sensegiving in a relevant way by taking into account their sensemaking needs and using a particular set of sensegiving strategies that stimulates and authorizes this shift (Foldy

et al., 2008). A helpful distinction for the variety of sensegiving strategies described in literature is Sonenshein's (2006) differentiation between discursive and symbolic strategies. Whereas the former describes communicative practices, e.g. explaining a situation or expressing an opinion (Maitlis, 2005), symbolic strategies comprise words, actions or objects with a wider meaning than their original one (Alvesson, 1991, p. 214).

#### **4.1.1 A Model of Organizational Change**

The literature on change management is characterized by a multitude of different models (Bacharach et al., 1996; Bullock & Batten, 1985; Dainty & Kakabadse, 1990; George & Jones, 2001; Isabella, 1990; Kotter, 1995, 2012; Latta, 2009). After reviewing over 30 different change models, Bullock and Batten (1985) proposed a change model consisting of four different phases, which has been considered as being highly applicable for most change situations (Burnes, 2004). Although phase models have obvious limitations in representing the complexity of organizational change, they are valuable for gaining insights in the role of time influencing the process (Kim et al., 2011).

Distinguishing four phases in change processes is useful to examine the different events and requirements over the lifecycle of a change despite the complexity of the process (Bullock & Batten, 1985; Isabella, 1990; van de Ven & Sun, 2011). In the first phase, labeled after the exploration phase according to the model of Bullock and Batten (1985), organizations become aware of a need (Dainty & Kakabadse, 1990) and start reflecting on the necessity of a change program. Although no official information on the change is yet available, organizational members try to gather as much information as possible by assembling scattered information about the change (Isabella, 1990, p. 17). During the second stage, the preparation phase, the change is planned, which is often expressed by data collection and goal setting (Bullock & Batten, 1985). The change sponsors need to decide "what changes are to be made and how they will be implemented" (Dainty & Kakabadse,

1990, p. 476). During the third phase, implementation, the different action steps are implemented (Bullock & Batten, 1985). This phase is often characterized by extensive information processing (George & Jones, 2001) as organizational members need to come to terms with the necessity of the change (Dainty & Kakabadse, 1990) and construct a collective understanding (Isabella, 1990, p. 23). During the last phase, evaluation, organizational members evaluate the usability of the newly construed reality as well as the change effectiveness (Dainty & Kakabadse, 1990).

As highlighted, each phase is characterized by different tasks and events that affect the information that organizational members process at each stage. Leader sensegiving aims at answering employees' most pressing questions (Press & Arnould, 2011), therefore they need to take into account the peculiarities of each phase to make their sensegiving meaningful to their followers. However, although our understanding about general employee sensemaking needs in change processes is well established, current literature is lacking a time perspective which addresses employees' specific sensemaking needs in the different change phases as well as corresponding leader sensegiving modes. Therefore, the following research question was addressed through this study: *What dominant sensemaking needs do employees experience in each phase of a change process and how do leaders account for these sensemaking needs in their sensegiving?*

## **4.2 Method**

### **4.2.1 Sample and Context**

In total, 55 qualitative interviews with organizational members in Germany and Austria were conducted. All individuals had experienced at least two episodic change projects in enterprises with over 1,000 employees, defined as change projects causing a radical shift in the organization (Bartunek, 1984). As remarked by Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974), the distinction between continuous and episodic change reflects differences in the perspective

of the viewer. Therefore, all participants were asked in the beginning of the interview about their understanding of the experienced change to ensure that all participants referred to similar change initiatives in terms of their effect on the organization and its members. All participants described the projects as changes in the deep structure of the organization or the frameworks underlying the organizational activities, all examples for the experience of episodic change (Bartunek & Moch, 1987).

The respondents came from a variety of different organizations, industries and change types in order to gain a general understanding of leader sensegiving independent of a specific organization or type of change. I conducted interviews with both leaders (n=26) and employees (n=29) to extend our understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving beyond a purely leader-centric approach. Furthermore, interviewees with a more holistic perspective on change processes were also included in each interview group, namely members of works councils for the employee group (n=11) and change consultants for the leader group (n=8). Both members of works councils and change consultants have a broader perspective on change processes than mere employees or leaders as they usually have better access to information and need to consider others' needs in their actions. Works councils function as 'firm-level complements to national or sectoral negotiations' (Grund & Schmitt, 2013, p. 299). They are a major stakeholder group in change projects in Germany and Austria (Waddington, 2011) where they often represent employees' voice towards management (Grund & Schmitt, 2013), for example by joining discussions on how to implement concrete changes in the work environment. However, they do not hold a leadership position in their organization. The change consultants all had significant experience in providing guidance for organizations and serving as sparring partner to leaders in times of organizational change. As the interviewed consultants do not function as exclusive coaches for singular leaders but rather consultants for whole departments or organizations, their perspective on change

initiatives is usually broader than those of leaders who are primarily concerned with their own department's future.

An overview of the demographics of the interviewees is depicted in Table 6. The sample was 67 percent male with 59 percent being between 30 and 49 years old. All of the interviewees with managerial experience and most of the employees (71 percent) held a university degree. 83 percent of the interviewees had at least 5 years of experience with change projects and worked across 7 different industries.

*Table 6: Demographics of Interviewees*

	Leaders N (%)	Employees N (%)	Total N (%)
<b>Age</b>			
Under 30	2 (7.7)	3 (10.7)	5 (9.3)
30-39	3 (11.5)	7 (25.0)	10 (18.5)
40-49	15 (57.7)	7 (25.0)	22 (40.7)
>50	6 (23.1)	11 (39.3)	17 (31.5)
<b>Sex</b>			
Female	10 (38.5)	8 (28.6)	17 (32.7)
Male	16 (61.5)	21 (72.4)	37 (67.3)
<b>Education</b>			
Professional degree	0 (0)	4 (14.3)	4 (7.4)
High school	0 (0)	4 (14.3)	4 (7.4)
University	26 (100.0)	20 (71.4)	46 (85.2)
<b>Industry</b>			
Professional Services	9 (34.6)	1 (3.4)	10 (18.2)

## The Interaction between Leader Sensegiving and Employee Sensemaking

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Energy & Materials	4 (15.4)	6 (20.7)	10 (18.2)
Telecommunications & Media	9 (34.6)	15 (51.7)	24 (43.6)
Transport & Logistics	1 (3.8)	4 (13.8)	5 (9.1)
Others	3 (11.5)	3 (10.3)	6 (10.9)
General work experience			
<5 years	0 (0)	2 (7.1)	2 (3.7)
5-10 years	4 (15.4)	6 (21.4)	10 (18.5)
>10 years	22 (84.6)	20 (71.4)	42 (77.8)
Experience with change			
<5 years	4 (15.4)	5 (17.9)	9 (16.7)
5-10 years	12 (46.2)	9 (32.1)	21 (38.9)
>10 years	10 (38.5)	14 (50.0)	24 (44.4)

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*Note: The number of employees only equals 29 for gender and industry as one employee did not return the demographic questionnaire: The respective information for age, education, and experience was therefore not available and could not be reconstructed.*

### 4.2.2 Procedure of Data Acquisition

The interview partners were recruited directly from organizations (75 percent), MBA candidates (20 percent) and professional social networks (5 percent). As the research question aimed at identifying differences in the change phases, I developed a topic guide which followed the four phases of a change process as described above (see Appendix B1). For each phase the interviewee was asked about (1) employee perception and needs ('How did you/do employees perceive this phase? What were you/ are employees most interested in?'), (2) suitable discursive sensegiving strategies ('What information from leaders did you find most appropriate/ do you evaluate most appropriate in this phase?'), (3) suitable symbolic

sensegiving strategies ('What leader behavior did you find most appropriate/ do you evaluate most appropriate in this phase?'). I conducted two pre-tests in order to test and adapt the topic guide. After these two interviews, the guideline was maintained across all 55 interviews. In order to ensure that participants understood the four phases used for the interviews, they were shown a visual representation of the four phases in a change process before starting the interviews (see Appendix B2). As the goal of the interviews was not to identify interviewees' understanding of the change process in terms of the different phases, participants were asked before interviewing if they agreed with the basic flow of the model and were willing and able to tell their experiences according to the four phases.

Depending on the participant's preference, the interviews were either performed at the interviewer's or interviewee's office with an average duration of 43.93 minutes ( $SD = 11.55$  minutes) for employees and 51.80 minutes for leaders ( $SD = 16.90$  minutes).

### **4.2.3 Data Analysis Strategy**

Template analysis was used to thematically analyze the data gained through the qualitative interviews (King, 2004). This approach was especially suited as it constitutes a middle way between purely deductive, where all categories are established before knowing the data, and inductive analysis, where all categories emerge from the data (Hadley, 2014). Although template analysis has its origins in healthcare research, it is also increasingly applied in the field of organizational and management research (Waring & Wainwright, 2008). Template analysis allows to start with predefined themes derived from literature (King, 2004) which are often reflected in the interview guide (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011). Over the course of the analysis, these themes are then refined and modified as the researchers make sense of the data.

The analysis encompassed three major steps as suggested by King (2004). In a first step, I carried out an initial coding according to the themes reflected in the topic guide. A

theme is defined as ‘some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). The three major themes in the topic guide (employee sensemaking, discursive leader sensegiving, symbolic leader sensegiving in each of the four change phases) served as the a priori template (King, 2004). Similar to Lindebaum and Fielden (2011), it became soon obvious that these a priori themes did not appropriately reflect the breadth and depth of the data.

Therefore, in a second step the a priori template was revised in order to produce an initial template with more specific codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), starting off with a set of ten interviews from both leaders and employees. For example, similar segments which had been coded to the ‘discursive sensegiving’ theme were grouped. These segments were then summarized and abstracted in order to identify their core meaning. For example, during the implementation, this revealed ‘giving room to challenges’ and ‘spreading positive messages’ as relevant strategies for discursive sensegiving in this phase. These strategies were then further aggregated to a more abstract concept of ‘balancing positive and negative aspects’ to reflect broader themes in the data (King, 2004). During this part of the analysis, at first leaders and employees were differentiated to ensure any differences between the two groups were taken into account in the analysis. Later, the first drafts of codes for both groups were compared and due to their high level of agreement, combined. At the end, a set of discursive and symbolic sensegiving concepts were identified that fitted both within and across the two interview groups.

In a third step, this template was applied to the full data set (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014). Some codes needed to be revised after applying the initial template to the full set of interviews, which constitutes an important step in developing the final template (King, 2004). During this process, I further aggregated the codes (Randall, Cox, & Griffiths, 2007), as the goal was to derive a coherent representation of adequate sensegiving in each phase. Figure 2

shows the dominant employee sensemaking needs and leader sensegiving modes in each change phase. Although this research does not further investigate the interrelations between both concepts, Figure 2 also indicates the reciprocal influence of sensemaking and sensegiving in each phase.

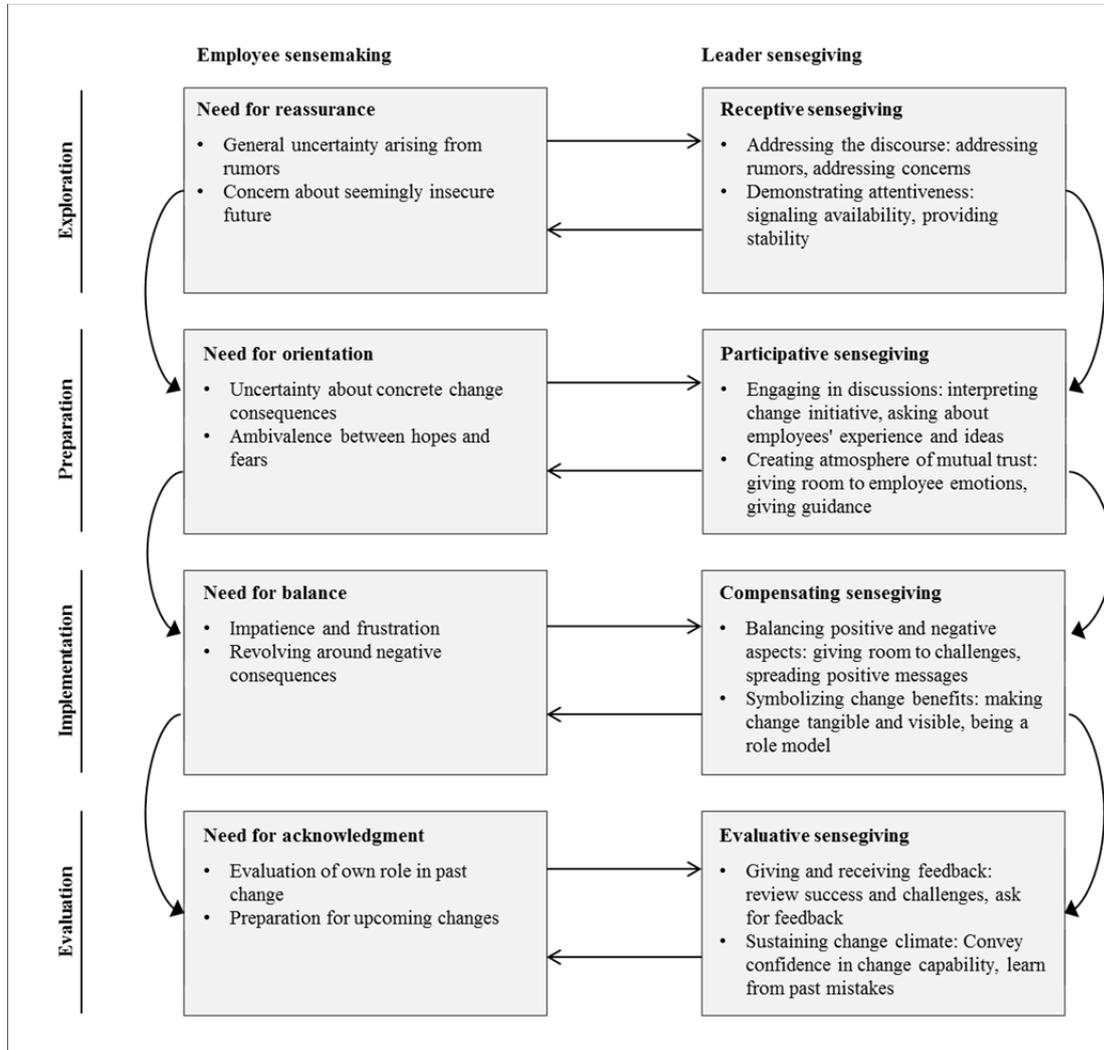


Figure 2: Model of Employee Sensemaking Needs and Leader Sensegiving Modes.

### 4.3 Results

For each phase of a change process, the analysis revealed one specific sensemaking need for each phase. However, organizational members experience some needs that are stable throughout all phases of a change process, such as adequate information (Allen et al., 2007).

The model only depicts the dominant need in each phase derived from the interviews, without neglecting that other needs will be experienced at the same time. This need is answered by a specific sensegiving mode in each way, which is characterized by a distinctive set of discursive and symbolic strategies.

### 4.3.1 Phase 1: Exploration - Receptive Sensegiving

**Sensemaking.** Employees' main sensemaking need during exploration is reassurance. Due to the often contradictory nature of the circulating rumors, employees experience a general uncertainty. This is exemplified by the following quotation: "Everything is reinforced, often catastrophic predictions are made. Like the worst case could actually happen. And then people discuss how it could look like and in the end, how bad it would be." Furthermore, the interviews showed employees' concern about a seemingly insecure future. A leader stated that his employees generally experience the exploration phase with "uncertainty, because not all facts are known; it is unclear what will actually happen. [...]". In order to regain stability and self-confidence, employees need to be put at ease by experiencing reassurance through their leaders.

**Discursive Sensegiving.** In their communication, leaders respond to the need for reassurance by addressing the discourse among employees. Interviewees mentioned two strategies for this: understanding the origins of rumors and taking in the concerns. By actively addressing the existing rumors, leaders learn about the tidbits of information circulating among employees as well as the way employees assemble this information for sensemaking. Leaders can rationalize these ongoing discussions: „Even if I do not know anything, I can still listen to it: verbalization of the emotional experience'. Addressing rumors allows moving away from the often excessive fears and bringing the discussions to a more rational level. Furthermore, leaders need to address subordinates' concerns. Here, one interviewee claimed

that “the right way to do it for a leader [...] is to face employees and say: 'Let's collect your thoughts. What are your fears? What's going on in your minds?'”. Addressing the uncertainty allows to deal with it.

**Symbolic Sensegiving.** Leaders can also express receptive sensegiving symbolically by demonstrating attentiveness to employees. Again, this is supported by two dominant strategies. On the one hand, leaders need to signal their availability to employees. The following quotation by a leader illustrates the significance of this code: “As a leader, I have to be available even when I don't know anything. [...] This is what I am here for. This is why I have this title, and this makes all the difference.” Demonstrating availability can also happen informally. For example, one employee mentioned: “We have lunch together frequently, there is a lot of informal communication, he is a very open manager, his door is always open”. On the other hand, demonstrating attentiveness is achieved by providing stability. To address employees' need for reassurance, the interviewees recommend leaders to ‘give security’ and ‘picking up the courage of the discouraged and take away the fear from the fearful’.

### 4.3.2 Phase 2: Preparation - Participative Sensegiving

**Sensemaking.** Employees' main sensemaking need during preparation is orientation to understand the meaning of the change. Here, the concerns experienced during the exploration phase substantiate as employees receive more information on the change program: the general uncertainty becomes concrete. The interviewees emphasized employees' concern about potential consequences for themselves: “Employees mainly care about: 'What does this mean for me?'”. The data also indicated employees' being torn between hopes for the better and fear for the worse. It is ‘a phase of big expectations’ as well as dismay and concern. Employees try to evaluate whether the upcoming change is beneficial or detrimental. In order to turn this inner conflict into readiness for change, employees need orientation by their leaders.

**Discursive Sensegiving.** Leaders can respond to this sensemaking need discursively by two strategies. First, interviewees suggest that leaders discuss and interpret the change initiative with employees, as illustrated by the following quotation: “Leaders should ask: ‘What opportunities do you have? Let’s discuss what this could mean for us.’”. Here, sensegiving is about joining employee sensemaking. Second, the data show that leaders need to ask for employees’ experiences and ideas. For employees, being able to contribute to the change and shaping it to a certain extent is one avenue to create meaning about the change. The following quote from the interviews demonstrates the need for leaders to allow subordinates to advance their opinion and ideas: “Don’t hesitate to ask: ‘How do you experience this and what could we do differently? What can I do differently?’ or ‘Now we finally can solve this problem. Do you have an idea?’”.

**Symbolic Sensegiving.** Symbolically, leaders express participative sensegiving by two dominant strategies. On the one hand, participative sensegiving is expressed by giving room to employee emotions. Especially the preparation phase is characterized by highly activating emotions as employees are confronted with details on the change for the first time. Leaders can “take into account that people define themselves through emotions and that these emotions loom large in this process”. On the other hand, leaders need to give guidance. In order to open up in discussions, employees need to feel backed by their superiors. By offering ‘guidance and [...] orientation’, leaders signal that even though they engage in discussions in search for meaning, they still fill their leadership role and provide the guidelines in this quest for meaning.

#### **4.3.3 Phase 3: Implementation - Compensating Sensegiving**

**Sensemaking.** Data showed that employee sensemaking risks to focus only on negative change consequences during implementation. Therefore, the main sensemaking need is balance, aiming at a concerted examination of both positive and negative change aspects.

Employee sensemaking is often characterized by impatience and frustration. For example, one employee described the experience of this phase as follows: “I have the feeling that we are stuck in a hole, and our mood is gradually getting worse. And if the mood is bad, the whole project is questioned”. Another interviewee was frustrated that “there is still nothing tangible. [...] It is so lingering, it is so slow”. Thus, the analysis revealed that employee sensemaking mainly revolves around negative aspect tends to overlook beneficial outcomes. Whilst the past is often glorified, the present is reduced to its unpleasant changes: “There are always people moaning: ‘Everything was better before. Why did we change?’”.

**Discursive Sensegiving.** Discursively, leaders’ compensating sensegiving mode is mainly represented by balancing the positive and negative aspects of the change. The data revealed two dominant concepts: giving room to problems and challenges as well as spreading positive messages. The first concept describes the need for leaders to address problems and challenges experienced by employees. A leader needs to listen “[...] to employees telling him: ‘This or that doesn't work.’ Then he should think about it and ask: ‘How can we make it better?’. [It is about] asking this question and not blocking anything, but being open to it”. Furthermore, leaders can give sense by spreading positive messages. Interviewees stressed the need of balancing employee sensemaking by nourishing employees with positive information. For example, an interviewee recommends highlighting “the opportunities [...] as well as the possibilities resulting from this change’. The focus should be on ‘preventing discussions and conversations from being dominated by negative topics [...]”.

**Symbolic Sensegiving.** The interview data indicated that compensating sensegiving also comprises symbolizing change benefits, represented by two strategies. First, leaders can show compensating sensegiving through rendering the change tangible and visible. Interviewees described employees as being interested in the change if they are able to actually experience it. This is illustrated in a quotation from an employee: “As soon as something is

visible and presentable, I want to see it.” These first-hand experiences serve as valuable input for employee sensemaking. The second concept of symbolizing change benefits is being a role model to employees. The interviewees stressed that leader behavior needs to be in line with their communication: “I have to live the change. I have to expose myself and say: 'This is it'”.

### **4.3.4 Phase 4: Evaluation - Evaluative Sensegiving**

**Sensemaking.** The main sensemaking need during evaluation is acknowledgment. Employees attempt to make sense of their own role in the change program. They evaluate not only the outcome of the change, but also their part in it: “Those who contributed to the phases one to three, in the broadest sense the employees, evaluate on a personal level, rarely with measuring and weighing, more often with a gut feeling”. This personal evaluation can be beneficial or detrimental to sensemaking. The data reveal the risk of a purely negative change evaluation if employees are discontent or unsatisfied with their own role during the change. By contrast, if they realize and acknowledge their own contribution, the evaluation can lead to an increase in employees’ confidence of their change capability. Besides the implemented change, employee sensemaking also revolves around the upcoming changes. One employee explained: “It's over and then you are already in the next phase. We are jumping right into new rumors [...]. I think this is very often already the first step in exploration”.

**Discursive Sensegiving.** Discursive sensegiving during evaluation means giving and receiving feedback. Thereby, leaders have the chance to open up employees’ mindset for an evaluation of the change. Analysis revealed two dominant concepts in the interviews. First, leaders should give room to the upsides and the downsides of the program by reviewing the change, “the biggest success and the biggest loss”. Although interviewees noted that employee sensemaking may have already circled around these topics, they also mentioned that having an open discussion about it ensures a balanced picture and a common

understanding of the change output. Second, leaders should also ask for feedback in order to create a dialogue. The data showed that including employees in the evaluation activates their sensemaking as they feel the need to contribute to the ongoing discourse.

**Symbolic Sensegiving.** Symbolically, leaders display the evaluative sensegiving mode by sustaining the change climate. This is supported by two dominant strategies. On the one hand, the data showed that leaders convey confidence in employees' change capabilities. Interviewees mentioned several appropriate strategies, e.g. complimenting employees on their achievements during the change or assigning more responsibility to them, as desired by an employee: 'Possibly give me more responsibility because of that and say: 'You did very well, next time you can do it on your own.''. On the other hand, leaders sustain the change climate by demonstrating openness to learn from mistakes: 'Also see how you have to change yourself [...]. So basically: learning together with the employees'.

#### 4.4 Discussion

Although each organizational member has particular concerns based on previous experiences, personal traits and the change consequences (Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011; Wisse & Sleebos, 2015), organizational change is often accompanied by shared concerns among employees. These concerns evoke different sensemaking needs in each change phase (Isabella, 1990), which affect leaders as they try to give meaningful sense to employees. Investigating sensegiving from a process perspective is therefore crucial for understanding the back and forth between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving and identify patterns among activities over time (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). Despite an increased interest in process theory in the field of sensemaking (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010a), sensemaking is still "a relative newcomer to process thinking" (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010b, p. 27). This study enhances our understanding of process in sensemaking by identifying dominant sensemaking needs and leaders' corresponding sensegiving modes over four phases of a change process.

The interview study shows that during the exploration phase, employee sensemaking is dominated by uncertainty and concern, fostered by existing rumors and the absence of official information. Employees experience a need for reassurance in their sensemaking, which is answered by leaders' addressing and taking in employees' concerns, namely receptive leader sensegiving. During preparation, employees are confronted with different and sometimes even contradictory information about the change. Their primary sensemaking need is orientation. Leaders respond to this need by participating in sensemaking with employees. Sensemaking during implementation focuses on the negative sides of the change. Employees' main sensemaking need is finding a balance between the initiative's negative and positive aspects. Leaders can respond to this need by providing compensating sensegiving, which offers a concerted view on the changes. Finally, sensemaking during evaluation is characterized by a personal evaluation of the change, resulting in the need for acknowledgment. Leaders respond by offering evaluative sensegiving which provides employees with feedback and prepares for upcoming changes.

These findings extend the literature on sensegiving by demonstrating how employee sensemaking places different demands in each phase of a change initiative and is supported by leader sensegiving responding to employees' primary sensemaking need. Whilst assuming that most episodic changes follow the logic claimed in the model, I recognize the intertwined nature of change. In practice, change initiatives move forth and back between the different phases, sometimes extending exploration, sometimes skipping evaluation. As mentioned by Huy (2002), leaders need to attend to the different reactions of followers in order to provide sensegiving that is meaningful for the individual context of subordinates as not all employees react in the same way to change. Thus, meaningful sensegiving requires leaders to be highly aware of their environment and to constantly revise their interpretations and sensegiving attempts according to this new information (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Although the

results suggest different sensegiving foci in different change phases, they do not suggest a rigid program of how to conduct sensegiving in times of organizational change. This research rather aims at encouraging a reflection about the specifics of each change phase and how these are best met by certain sensegiving modes. This hopefully allows to further understand the different dynamics in each change phase and how these are often experienced by employees and should be responded to by leaders. Needless to say, in order to fully unfold its potential, each sensegiving mode has to be accompanied by other factors well-known in change literature, such as high-quality change information (Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994), policies supporting the change (Eby, Adams, Russell, & Gaby, 2000) or a participative change structure (Wanberg & Banas, 2000).

### **4.4.1 Limitations**

Despite the contributions, this research has certain limitations. First, the interviews were conducted retrospectively, which entail the risk of retrospective bias. However, the data can be considered reliable for several reasons. On the one hand, several studies have shown the high reliability of retrospective interviews (Gutek, 1978; Hollingworth & Miller, 2007). On the other hand, I aimed to minimize retrospective bias by triggering the recall through reflection. Each interview was started with a general question on the aim and scope of the change projects the interviewee participated in and his or her own role in it. Furthermore, visual stimulus was used – a figure of the change phases – to explain each phase before asking the questions to ensure understanding of the different phases to ensure the interviewees gave their answers accordingly.

Second, the topic guide prompted interviewees to account for different change phases. By basing the topic guide on a four-phase model of organizational change, interviewees were strongly encouraged to adhere to these four phases when answering the interview questions. However, the aim was to identify differences between the phases and extend our

understanding on the role of time for sensemaking and sensegiving during change. Thus, the research question necessitated prompting interviewees with regards to the four phases.

However, I strongly encourage future research which accompanies a change projects as it unfolds in order to validate and extend the findings.

Another limitation considers the fact that there was no differentiation made between types of change. However, I deliberately decided to include interviewees with experiences from a variety of change programs to find a generalizable answer to the research question, independent of the type of change. In order to ensure a similar set of experiences towards the change, only interview partners who experienced episodic change were accepted: ‘radical, discontinuous shift in interpretive schemas: organizational paradigms are reframed, and norms and world views are changed’ (Bartunek, 1984, p. 356). Although different change types are very similar regarding the underlying process of schema emergence (Bartunek & Moch, 1987), I do not deny possible deviances in the sensemaking process or the sensegiving design in between episodic changes. Thus, I encourage future research investigating differences in leader sensegiving depending on the type of change.

### **4.4.2 Implications for Practice**

Creating and sustaining positive change attitudes among employees is a major challenge for organizations undergoing episodic change (Armenakis et al., 1993; George & Jones, 2001; Rafferty & Simons, 2006): practitioners deplore the large number of failed change initiatives (Isern & Pung, 2007). The model offers two directions for organizations to follow when aiming to evoke positive change attitudes.

First, change leaders must take into account the specifics of each change phase when communicating with their employees. This research shows that each change phase is distinctive not only in its formal characteristics, but also in employees primary sensemaking need. In order to account for these demands, leaders need to reflect on where they are

standing in the change project and what is of major interest for their employees. As the fast pace of organizational routine allows only very limited time for reflection (Raelin, 2002), formalized reflection sessions initiated by the change management team should be conducted. In times of stress such as organizational change, leaders tend to cling to the first explanations that come to their mind (Vince, 2002). Thus, formalized reflections among leaders should be regularly executed over the course of a change initiative and can be supported by different tools, such as critical incident analysis or reflective journals (Gray, 2007).

Second, change leaders need to be aware of the interplay between symbolic and discursive sensegiving means. Building on previous research in the field of symbolism (Armenakis et al., 1996; Gioia et al., 1994; Johnson, 1990), this research provides first indications that the power of sensegiving only unfolds if communication is supported by symbolic means. For example, one of the interviewees warned that during exploration, many leaders „are not present anymore, it’s like: ‘Oh my god, I don’t dare going to my office because I know my employees expect an answer to a question that I can’t answer right now.’”. Thus, leaders should always accompany their communication with supportive behavior, e.g. making change tangible during implementation. Divergent discursive and symbolic sensegiving, when leaders say one thing but act differently, would supposedly be seen as inconsistent by employees, thus leading to detrimental sensegiving where employees doubt their leaders’ sensegiving attempts.

### **4.4.3 Directions for Future Research**

One avenue for future research could be to investigate how the transition from one sensegiving focus to another happens and how it is supported by ongoing sensegiving activities that address overarching sensemaking needs. For example, across all phases the interviewees mentioned that employees experience a constant need for information, also in line with literature on change communication (Allen et al., 2007). It would be interesting to

investigate how sensegiving takes different forms to address employees' specific needs in each change phase whilst constantly targeting ongoing needs, such as the need for valid information to reduce the uncertainty associated with rumors (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998).

Arguments can be found for both a sudden and a smooth transition. Previous studies have shown that change projects are often characterized by signature events, e.g. official announcements or the start of the implementation (Isabella, 1990). Leaders could take advantage of these events to switch from one sensegiving mode to the other. In times of change, organizational members usually engage in active information processing (Louis & Sutton, 1991). This active mode should allow both leaders and employees to reflect on the new demands a change poses and stimulate each other's sensemaking and sensegiving in a way that fosters the transfer from one mode to the other. The second possible avenue is a smooth transition from one to the other sensegiving form. Here, leaders would use two sensegiving modes for a certain transition period before switching to the dominating mode in the new phase. Since I do not claim a strict distinction between the modes in each phase, this avenue seems more plausible. Investigating leader sensegiving in a longitudinal case study in an organization undergoing change would provide valuable insights in how the transition between change phases is reflected in leader sensegiving modes.

A second research implication is related to the extent that the identified sensegiving modes are executed predominantly during specific phases of organizational change. This research contributes to theory by outlining the different modes as a response to sensemaking needs in the respective phases. However, I did not investigate a real-time case of change. In order to learn about the actual occurrence of the interplay between employee sensemaking needs and leader sensegiving modes in times of organizational change, I encourage longitudinal research on employee sensemaking needs and leader sensegiving. A deviance of actual leader sensegiving and the outlined model of effective sensegiving could serve as a

rationale for ineffective employee sensemaking. A mixed methods approach that both explicates and expands the model as well as tests first assumptions seems especially suitable. So far, studies on sensemaking and sensegiving are almost exclusively qualitative (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013). However, the incipient maturity of the field suggests the inclusion of quantitative methods, thus allowing to expand and test existing propositions in the field.

Furthermore, future research could investigate how different leader sensegiving activities across the change phases contribute in fostering employees' change capacity. Today's business environment is characterized by constant change (Rodell & Colquitt, 2009). Therefore, change capacity – the ability to adapt to continuous change (Meyer & Stensaker, 2006) – is crucial for organizational members to cope with their ever-changing organizations. Here, future research could investigate how different sensegiving modes and respective strategies that answer employees' differing sensemaking needs across the phases of a change process foster a change facilitative climate, one of the facilitators for change capacity (Buono & Kerber, 2010), and allow individuals to reduce their uncertainty and accept the change (Cullen, Edwards, Casper, & Gue, 2014). A potential study design could be a longitudinal case study in an organization undergoing change and investigate both leaders' sensegiving (e.g., what strategies they are using in each phase) and employees' attitude towards the change across all change phases.

### **4.5 Conclusion of Chapter 4**

As Mantere et al. (2012) noted, leader sensegiving is successful if employees develop the intended interpretive schemas. Sensemaking evolves over time (Balogun & Johnson, 2004) and entails different needs and desires in each phase of a change process (Isabella, 1990). This study provides scholars and practitioners in the field of organizational change with insights on how leader sensegiving can support building a common understanding among organizational members in times of change. Findings of this study, especially in the

context of related empirical studies, suggest that leaders need to tailor their sensegiving attempts to the specifics of each phase.

## 5 Conclusion

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis examined the context and process of leader sensegiving by outlining the role of contextual factors on the individual, interpersonal, and organizational level (Chapters 2 and 3) as well as the dominant sensegiving modes in response to varying employee sensemaking needs over the course of a change process (Chapter 4). Figure 3 depicts the basic leader sensegiving process with the main results of this dissertation.

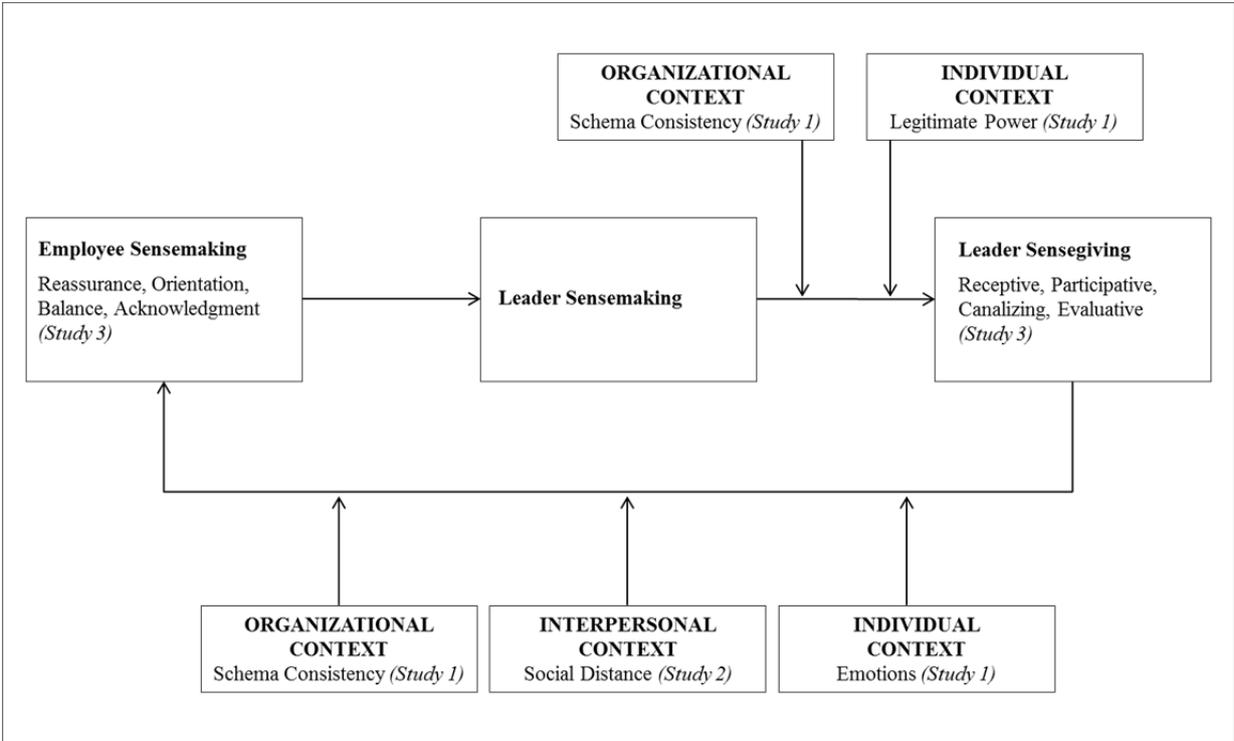


Figure 3: Basic Leader Sensegiving Process with Main Results of this Dissertation

Whereas the basic model itself is well established in extant literature (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kuntz & Gomes, 2012; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007), this dissertation enhances our understanding of two factors. First, it illustrates the role of contextual factors for leader sensegiving by investigating how variables on the organizational, interpersonal, and individual level affect the process. As depicted in Figure 3, the examined factors affect leader sensegiving at two stages: They can either influence the relationship between leader

sensemaking and sensegiving or the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking. During the first phase, this dissertation demonstrates that both the organizational and the individual context affect leader sensegiving (see Chapter 2). On the organizational level, schema consistency moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that the positive relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving intensity will be stronger at low levels of schema consistency. If leaders engage in effortful sensemaking, they will always show high sensegiving intensity to support employees' sensemaking. However, this relationship will be moderated by schema consistency. This means that leaders experiencing a high inconsistency between the schemas they created during their sensemaking and the existing organizational schemas will engage in even higher levels of sensegiving because they experience the change as very disruptive and difficult to make sense of with existing schemas. On the individual level, the level of legitimate power moderates the relationship between leader sensemaking and sensegiving such that leaders use more direct, unilateral strategies (e.g., communicating face-to-face with one employee at a time) with abstract, positive, and normative language if their level of legitimate power is high. If their level of power is low, they are most likely to use indirect, multilateral strategies (e.g., sending an email to the whole team) together with concrete, negative, and rational language.

Figure 3 also depicts the second phase at which leader sensegiving is affected by contextual factors: the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking. The organizational and individual factors affect the likelihood that leader sensegiving triggers the emergence of new versus an alteration of existing schemas among employees (see Chapter 2). On the organizational level, leader sensegiving is more likely to trigger an alteration of existing schemas in employee sensemaking if it shows high consistency with existing schemas. As employees engage in sensemaking, they continuously compare new information

with their existing schemas (Harris, 1994). If these schemas coincide for the most part, they are more likely to alter their existing schemas to fit the new environment entirely than creating completely new schemas. By contrast, employees are even more likely to engage in a full schema emergence process if leader sensegiving is inconsistent with their existing schemas. Further, the effect of leader sensegiving on employee sensemaking is also affected by social distance, a factor on the interpersonal level (see Chapter 3). The results from this thesis point to the direction that leaders can increase employees' perception of their supportive behavior by creating a fit between their sensegiving message and the situation, especially with regard to the temporal distance of the message content. In order to tap the full potential of leader sensegiving, employees need to consider their leaders as being trustworthy (Rafferty & Simons, 2006) and supportive of the change (Self, Armenakis, & Schraeder, 2007). Therefore, their perception of management support is a major predictor for the attention and legitimacy that they contribute to leader sensegiving activities. This thesis provides first indications that employees perceive management as more supportive if leader appeals announcing a change initiative that is about to happen in the near future are communicated by leaders with whom they experience close social distance - for example, a direct supervisor announcing an upcoming change by naming specific ways of participating in the change. By contrast, an appeal announcing a change in the distant future that is communicated by a leader who is socially distant might as well increase employees' perception of management support - for example, a board member announcing a change starting next year.

Second, this thesis demonstrates how the interaction between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving is characterized by varying forms in each change phase. Each of the four steps in a change process (Bullock & Batten, 1985) has distinct characteristics regarding the dominant sensemaking needs or the corresponding sensegiving mode (see Chapter 4).

Although Figure 3 is simplified and does not depict the different phases of a change process, it shows the general relationship between employee sensemaking needs and leader sensegiving forms and how they affect each other. In each phase of a change process, employee sensemaking is dominated by a prevailing need (reassurance, orientation, balance, and acknowledgment) that is answered by a respective leader sensegiving form (receptive, participative, compensating, and evaluative). Employee sensemaking needs affect leader sensemaking as they attempt to “develop a meaningful framework” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442) of their environment. Leaders use their understanding of employees’ sensemaking needs to shape their sensegiving according to employees’ demands.

However, the reciprocity of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) suggests that this is not a linear process but rather a continuous interaction between leaders and employees as the change advances. Employees integrate leader sensegiving attempts together with the new information on the change, which in turn can lead to new needs that are again incorporated in leader sensegiving activities. This dissertation investigated the bidirectional relationship between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving based on a four-step model of organizational change derived from the literature (Bullock & Batten, 1985; Isabella, 1990; van de Ven & Sun, 2011). In the first phase, exploration, employees experience a need for reassurance as the multitude of rumors and unconfirmed information about the change leads to high uncertainty. Leaders answer this need by showing receptive sensegiving - for example, listening to their followers’ concerns. During the second phase, preparation, employee sensemaking is characterized by a need for orientation as they know about the upcoming change but struggle to understand its rationale and its necessity. Here, leaders respond to this need through participative sensegiving - for example, by asking about employees’ ideas for the change initiative. In the third phase, implementation, employees need to balance their positive and negative experiences in order to avoid a negative downward

spiral. Here, leaders account for this need through compensating sensegiving - for example, giving room to problems and challenges. In the last phase called evaluation, employees experience a need for acknowledgment as they reflect on the change. Leaders respond to this need by showing evaluative sensegiving - for example, asking for feedback.

### **5.2 Main Contributions of the Dissertation**

The empirical parts of this dissertation (Chapters 2-4) aim at enhancing our understanding of leader sensegiving in times of organizational change by investigating the process and context from different angles and using different methodological approaches. On the one hand, this dissertation increases our knowledge of leader sensegiving context, a previously rather neglected area although context has been acknowledged as a significant factor for the success of sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) On the other hand, it contributes to our understanding of sensegiving as a process. Despite the inherent processual nature of sensemaking and sensegiving (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010a) and recent calls to include process thinking in leadership research (Bluedorn & Jaussi, 2008; Shamir, 2011), research taking a process perspective on sensegiving is still scarce. This dissertation contributes to previous literature in both directions.

One contribution lies in demonstrating the different influences of moderators on the sensegiving process depending on the phase of the sensegiving process during which they occur. By investigating sensegiving from a processual perspective, two stages are especially relevant for moderators of leader sensegiving (see Figure 3): the relationship between leader sensemaking on leader sensegiving and the relationship between leader sensegiving and employee sensemaking. This thesis contributes to extant research by illustrating how moderators affect the sensegiving process at these two stages and how sensegiving depends upon proceeding effectively at both steps. Thus, sensegiving as a process exceeds the mere execution of its content: employees' 'sense-receiving' forms part of the whole sensegiving

process and needs to be incorporated in leaders' attention to increase the effectiveness of their sensegiving. Whereas variables in the first phase affect the way leader sensegiving is executed by influencing leaders' choice of strategies, language, and intensity, variables in the second phase influence the effectiveness of sensegiving on employee sensemaking.

A second contribution of this thesis lies in the investigation of the context of leader sensegiving in times of change. As depicted in Figure 3, sensegiving is affected by moderators from the individual, interpersonal, and organizational context. By distinguishing between factors from the individual, interpersonal, and organizational context, this dissertation also follows calls to consider different levels of analysis when investigating organizational change processes (Amis & Aïssaoui, 2013; Scott, 2010; Vakola, 2013). Furthermore, it contributes to extant research by outlining how the success of sensegiving is not only determined by the adequacy of sensegiving activities for creating a shared meaning, but also by contextual factors that are often out of the control of leaders. Although previous research has shown that sensegiving is embedded in a social context (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014; Taylor & van Every, 2000), little research has been conducted to investigate how this context affects the process. As successful sensemaking is a crucial factor for organizational members' supportive change behavior (Monin et al., 2013), which in turn often leads to a high number of unsuccessful change initiatives (Burnes, 2011), investigating the context as a determinant for the effectiveness of leader sensegiving also suggests a possible avenue for increasing the success of leader sensegiving activities.

Third, the sensegiving process is investigated here by outlining the back and forth between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving over the course of a change process. As depicted in Figure 3, employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving are reciprocal processes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) characterized by dialogical dynamics (Monin et al., 2013). This thesis takes a processual perspective by delineating how employees' dominant

sensemaking needs shift over the course of a change process and the corresponding leader sensegiving modes should respond to these different needs. Here, the thesis contributes to our understanding of sensegiving by outlining the back and forth between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving, leading up to different forms of both processes as the change advances.

### **5.3 Implications for Practice**

This dissertation also contains a number of practical implications. First, it demonstrates that successful sensegiving has to respond to employee sensemaking needs. In order to provide meaningful sensegiving, managers need time for reflection. Especially in times of change, organizations should encourage managers to reflect by establishing regular reflection sessions. Regular reflection is at the core of organizational and individual learning because it advances both transformation and empowerment (Hilden & Tikkamäki, 2013). Thus, establishing a platform for individual considerations and joint discussions on the specific demands of each change phase would increase the suitability of leader sensegiving activities for the specific context. Furthermore, reflection promotes professional growth (Gray, 2007) and would thus foster the development of managers to change leaders. However, time restraints often hinder managers from taking the time to reflect on what is happening around them (Raelin, 2002). Therefore, critical reflection should be facilitated and appreciated by the organization, for example, through the establishment of learning processes such as coaching and mentoring (Gray, 2007).

Second, this dissertation demonstrates the relevance of context for sensegiving. Transferred to practice, organizations should consider the context when setting up communication strategies for change programs. Communication departments usually consider the who, what, and how for the design of communication strategies (Klein, 1996). This research contributes to these deliberations by pointing out the role of contextual factors for the

success of communication attempts in times of change. Effective internal communication is especially relevant during change (Daly, Teague, & Kitchen, 2003) when it is crucial to not only provide information (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008) but also to emphasize a common purpose and vision (Lewis et al., 2006). The present research suggests that various factors on the organizational, interpersonal, and individual level affect the positive effect of leader communication and should be taken into account when preparing change communication. For example, employees' emotions are highly relevant for the reception process of sensegiving messages. Employees who experience positive emotions during sensegiving are more likely to fully engage in schema emergence and adapt their understanding of the environment completely to the new surroundings. Organizations should therefore consider the mood of employees for change announcements. The communication of radical changes in which a new structure, program, or strategy substitutes an old one (Plowman et al., 2007) should start with picturing a positive future in order to evoke positive feelings among employees. Although this will be challenging, especially in times of organizational change when negative emotions are predominant (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), keeping in mind the role of emotions and other context factors would be highly beneficial for practitioners' use of communicative strategies.

Third, the importance of respecting popular opinions in organizations for change communication is emphasized. This dissertation has demonstrated that employees incorporate sensegiving faster in their sensemaking if it shows a high consistency with dominant schemas. This is in accordance with previous research showing that communication in line with the dominant stories in an organization are perceived as more convincing by organizational members (Näslund & Perner, 2012). Thus, if time is crucial and organizations need their employees to come to terms with a change quickly, managers need to tailor their communication to outline potential similarities with traditional views of the organization. For example, if a company has a continued tradition of presenting itself as traditional, leader

sensegiving focusing on the company's innovativeness will take longer to be accepted by employees than sensegiving in line with the existing view. Therefore, managers could stress examples of the company's previous innovativeness in order to establish 'innovativeness' as a value in accord with the tradition of the company. In order to adjust misleading or unsuccessful sensegiving attempts, managers need to always have one ear on the ground (Pagonis, 1992) and monitor employees' reactions to their sensegiving closely (Self et al., 2007).

### **5.4 Directions for Future Research**

The results of this dissertation enhance our understanding of the context and process of leader sensegiving, thus opening up several avenues for future research in this field. First, although sensegiving is indisputably embedded in an organizational and social context (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014), research on the influence of context on the sensegiving process is still scarce. Here it is outlined how context factors influence sensegiving at two different stages. Although these factors offer a first understanding of how the context affects the process, more research is needed on the moderators of sensegiving to fully understand their positive or detrimental effect on sensegiving. A helpful framework for investigating further moderators could be Howell, Dorfman, and Kerr's (1986) typology of moderators in leadership research where the authors distinguish between different mechanisms by which moderator variables operate (Howell et al., 1986). A suitable distinction for the context of leader sensegiving is the differentiation between neutralizers and enhancers. Whereas neutralizers have a negative moderating effect, enhancers represent a positive moderating influence. Future research could investigate further moderators by delineating the enhancing versus neutralizing effect of different variables on employee sensemaking and thus demonstrating how contextual factors can either hinder or foster the effect of leader sensegiving. One interesting avenue would be the investigation of

group-level factors. Sensemaking and sensegiving have an "inherently social nature" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21); however, our understanding of the influence of group-level factors is underdeveloped (Eden, 1992). Here, it would be interesting to investigate what factors hinder or facilitate leader sensegiving. For example, middle manager sensegiving has been continuously highlighted in previous research as being highly relevant for the sensemaking of superiors as well as subordinates (Balogun, 2006; Beck & Plowman, 2009; Hope, 2010). However, to my knowledge, no research has yet been undertaken to understand under which conditions middle manager sensegiving enriches versus simplifies leader sensegiving.

Second, this thesis demonstrates that each phase of a change process is characterized by a dominant sensemaking need and answered by a dominant sensegiving mode. Although this finding is a first step in disentangling the interrelatedness of sensemaking and sensegiving (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985), the reciprocal character of both processes should be further investigated. Previous research has focused on top-down sensegiving (Foldy et al., 2008; Humphreys et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2010). However, first studies have demonstrated that the bottom-up direction, employee sensegiving affecting leader sensemaking, is likewise important for organizational sensemaking (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Sonenshein, 2010). Thus, future research should not only engage in depicting the "dynamic interplay between managers' and employees' meaning constructions" (Sonenshein, 2010, p. 478), but also in enhancing our understanding of employee sensegiving as a factor influencing leader sensemaking, for example, in terms of the employed strategies and its effect on leader sensemaking.

Third, this dissertation provides first indications that construal fit between the content of a sensegiving message (e.g., whether the change is happening in the near or distant future) and the attributes of the situation when it is communicated (e.g., social distance between employee and leader) enhances employees' perception of management support for the change.

It examines leaders' announcement of change initiatives as one example for sensegiving strategies (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). However, sensegiving consists of various sensegiving strategies, that is, both discursive and symbolic tactics (Sonenshein, 2006). Here, future research should explore whether construal fit likewise affects the reception and influence of other sensegiving strategies. As individuals are especially receptive for symbols in times of organizational change (Fiss & Zajac, 2006) and symbolic processes allow leaders to direct employees toward a common understanding and action (Poole, Gioia, & Gray, 1989), an especially promising avenue would therefore be the investigation of symbolic strategies. One trivial yet often mentioned example for symbolic sensegiving is holding meetings (e.g., Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Starke, Sharma, Mauws, Dyck, & Dass, 2011; Stensaker et al., 2008). Leaders can use meetings not only for discussions or information but also to send signals of availability and support to employees. With respect to this, future research could investigate how the content (e.g., the agenda) and the context (e.g., who is the organizer) of the meeting can enhance the symbolic power of the meeting if both coincide - for example, having a high-level manager inviting employees to a meeting to answer questions on the strategic direction of the company. As the effectiveness of symbols is especially dependent on the social context (Feldman, 1986), future research should investigate whether symbolic strategies depend even more strongly on construal fit between the attributes of the strategy and the situation especially since the context is part of how they are understood.

Fourth, different sensegiving strategies could also be investigated in terms of their effectiveness for sensegiving across different phases and change types. This thesis discloses what sensegiving strategies are most successful in answering specific sensemaking needs. However, the role of specific strategies for sensegiving effectiveness is still underexplored. Previous research has focused on exploring sensegiving as an encompassing concept consisting of a multitude of strategies (Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence, 2011; Maitlis

& Lawrence, 2007; Smith et al., 2010). However, the distinction between discursive and symbolic strategies (Sonenshein, 2006) suggests that sensegiving can largely differ in its content, depending on the chosen strategies. For example, strategies such as reallocating financial resources and restructuring of programs (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) are likely to have a different effect than discussing viewpoints of others or using examples to illustrate a change (Vlaar et al., 2008). Although future research should not neglect that sensegiving is not only a single strategy but rather a complex consisting of both words and actions (Smith et al., 2010), it should examine what sensegiving strategies are especially effective under certain circumstances, for example, according to the change phase and type. In her study on leader sensemaking, Isabella (1990) outlined that symbols are especially relevant in the planning phase of change processes. However, her study did not detail what strategies are exactly suitable for this phase. Thus, future research should use a longitudinal design and accompany a specific change process as it unfolds over time. A case study approach in one organization would allow for investigating how sensegiving advances over the course of a change process and how it affects employee sensemaking in a more or less effective way according to the employed strategies.

In conclusion, the research in this dissertation shows how leader sensegiving in times of organizational change is affected by the organizational, interpersonal, and individual context. Furthermore, the present work provides evidence for the interrelatedness of employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving by demonstrating how the latter responds to varying needs over the course of a change process. Offering several theoretical and practical implications, this thesis intends to enhance our understanding of successful change management by demonstrating ways to convey the meaning of the change to others and invite them to actively engage themselves in the change process as the “only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.” (Watts, 1951, p. 43).

## 6 References

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## **7 Appendix**

### **Appendix A**

#### **A1. Study 1 - Basic Scenario**

For the last few years, you have been working for a leading company in the telecommunications industry. Your organization focuses on the production of networking equipment.

Although the company is still market leader, it encountered several problems over the last months: the competitive environment has become fierce, some recent acquisitions could not be integrated successfully, and profits have continuously declined. As a result, industry experts drastically reduced their expectations about the company's value. The management board of your company has decided to react by restructuring your company through three organizational changes: (1) reorganization of field operations around three consolidated geographic regions, (2) reorganization of customer services around customer segments, and (3) reduction of number of cross-functional councils and boards. This is a major organizational change for your company, and the biggest you have encountered since working with the organization.

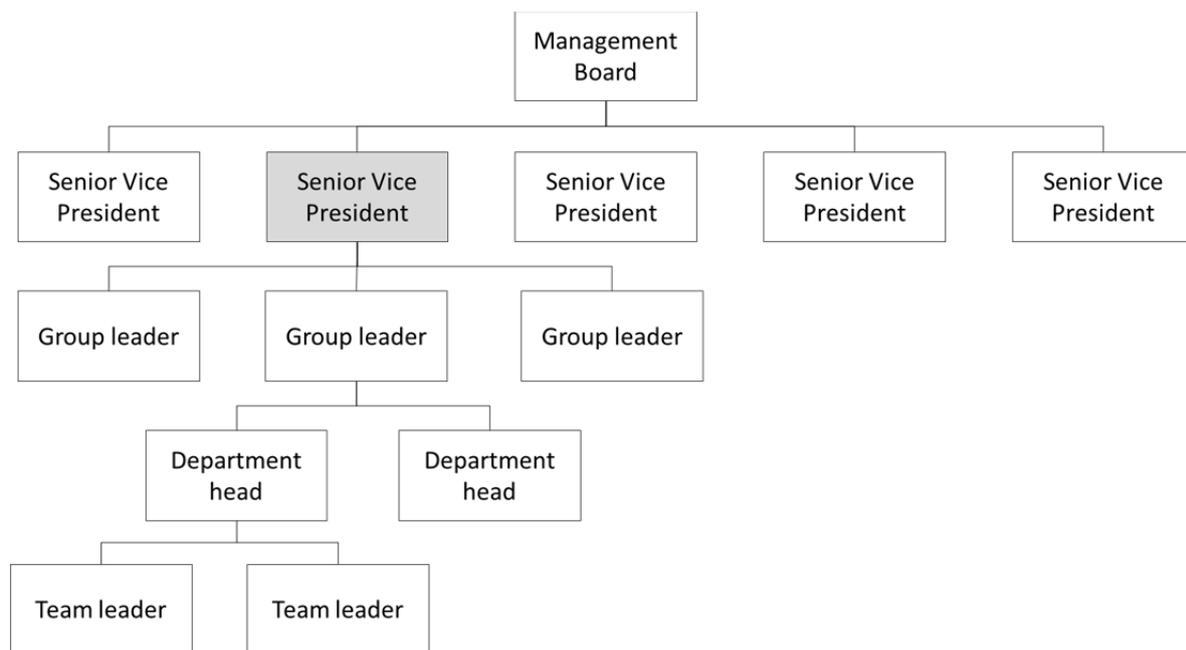
## A2: Study 1 – Social Distance Manipulations

### High Social Distance

Today was the first official communication on the restructuring. It was a speech performed by a member of the management board. You are Senior Vice President in the company and are **directly reporting to the management board**. In total, you are leading **5,000 employees**.

You have been with the company for 6 years and have **substantial amount of control over organizational resources**. You are **reporting to the management board** on a regular basis.

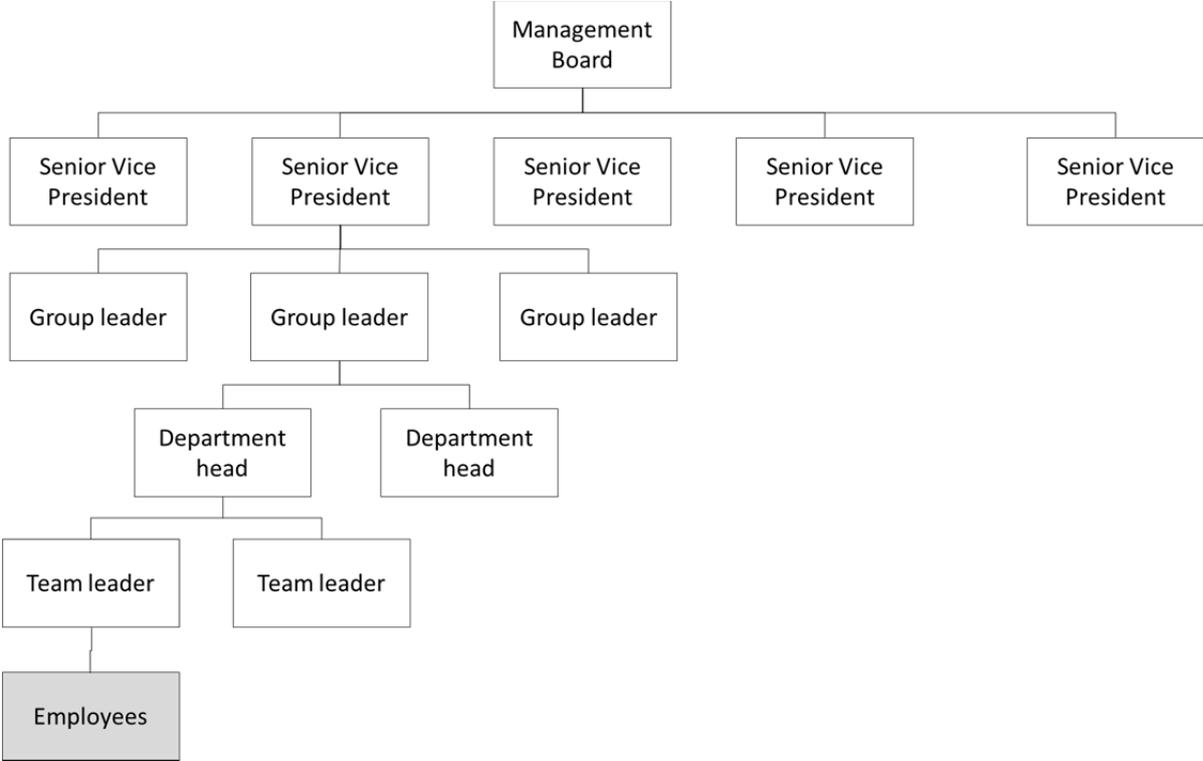
Below is an exemplary organizational chart of your company with your highlighted position.



**Low Social Distance**

Today was the first official communication on the restructuring. It was a speech performed by a member of the management board. You are an **employee** of the organization with **no control over organizational resources** and **no leadership responsibilities**. You are reporting to your team leader and **never directly interact** with the management board.

Below is an exemplary organizational chart of your company with your highlighted position.



### **A3. Study 1: Message Abstractness Manipulations**

#### **High Abstractness**

I'd like to share with you my thoughts about this company, about what I think are the challenges of the next decade and how our future will look like. About what's working well and is fundamental to who we are and what we stand for. And about aspects of this organization we need to change in the next decade, what you can expect from me and what I expect from you as we execute our decisions together.

I've solicited very direct feedback from many of you—as individuals, in small group meetings and through your participation in my blog postings and our discussion forums.

You've also made it very clear that we must make it simpler in the future to do the work we love to do, and to accelerate the impact we can make for our customers in the next decade.

Our strategy for the next decade is sound. It is aspects of our operational execution that are not. We now need to prepare ourselves for what's happening in the future, as you will see our organization make a number of targeted moves in the coming years and as we move into the next decade.

These actions will represent a very simple set of guiding principles that we will use in the future for our restructuring efforts:

1. We will not fix what's not broken. There are numerous areas where we're executing incredibly well for our customers and partners. We will not get into the way of your success. We will not get into the way of your success in the upcoming years of the transformation.
2. We will take bold steps and we will make tough decisions. With change comes disruption, and you will see this necessary and healthy disruption in the future as we make meaningful decisions in a timely, targeted and measureable way.
3. We will accelerate our leadership across our five core business divisions. Again, our

strategy to extend the role of the network in the next decade will not change. Our approach to leadership in the core amidst this transition will change. In switching we understand that our customers are buying across broader segments and specific needs in this market.

4. In the future, we will make it easier for you to work here, as we make it easier for our customers and partners to work with us.

We are all responsible for driving operational excellence here. As you'd expect, I'm asking each of you to play your part in this transition as we prepare ourselves for the next decade. The responsibility does not fall on one leader or one team. It will not be easy and I expect your participation, flexibility and feedback along the way over the next years. Plain and simple - we need to roll up our sleeves and work it out, together. I'm ready, your leadership team is ready, and I know you are ready.

Thank you for being part of this organization. You have my commitment, my respect and my appreciation. Let's define and win this transition together. This is our start for shaping the network success of the future. Let's prepare ourselves for our journey of "Transformation 2020", a journey we will embark in the future.

## **Low Abstractness**

I'd like to share with you my thoughts about this company, about what I think are our challenges today and how tomorrow will look like. About what's working well and is fundamental to who we are and what we stand for. And about aspects of this organization we need to change starting today, what you can expect from me and what I expect from you as we execute our decisions together.

I've solicited very direct feedback from many of you—as individuals, in small group meetings and through your participation in my blog postings and our discussion forums.

You've also made it very clear that we must start today to make it simpler to do the work we love to do, and to accelerate the impact we know we can make for our customers as of tomorrow. Our strategy that we are pursuing today is sound. It is aspects of our operational execution that are not. We now need to prepare ourselves for what's there tomorrow, as you will see our organization make a number of targeted moves in the coming weeks and as we move into the next year.

These actions represent a very simple set of guiding principles, that we will start using today for our restructuring efforts:

1. We do not fix what's not broken. There are numerous areas where we're executing incredibly well for our customers and partners. We are not getting into the way of your success in the upcoming weeks of the transformation.
2. We are about to take bold steps and make tough decisions. With change comes disruption, and you will see this necessary and healthy disruption starting today as we make meaningful decisions in a timely, targeted and measureable way.
3. We are accelerating our leadership across our five core divisions. Again, our strategy to extend the role of the network today is not changing. Our approach to leadership in the core

amidst this transition is changing. In switching we understand that our customers are buying across broader segments and specific needs in this market.

4. As of tomorrow, we will make it easier for you to work here, as we make it easier for our customers and partners to work with us.

We are all responsible for driving operational excellence here. As you'd expect, I'm asking each of you to play your part in this transition as we prepare ourselves for today's challenges.

The responsibility does not fall on one leader or one team. It will not be easy and I expect your participation, flexibility and feedback along the way today and tomorrow. Plain and simple - we need to roll up our sleeves right now and work it out, together. I'm ready, your leadership team is ready, and I know you are ready.

Thank you for being part of this organization. You have my commitment, my respect and my appreciation. Let's define and win this transition together. This is our start for shaping tomorrow's network success. Let's start our journey of "Transformation 2015" today.

#### **A4. Study 2 - Basic Scenario**

Sie sind seit mehreren Jahren Mitarbeiter bei einem führenden Unternehmen in der Telekommunikationsindustrie. Obwohl das Unternehmen Marktführer ist, gab es in den letzten Monaten einige Herausforderungen: der Konkurrenzdruck hat stetig zugenommen, die Kundenzufriedenheit ist zurückgegangen und die Gewinne sind kontinuierlich gesunken. In Folge dessen wurde das Unternehmen auch von Industrieexperten deutlich schlechter bewertet als in den Vorjahren. Der Vorstand Ihres Unternehmens hat sich daher dazu entschieden, auf die veränderten Marktbedingungen mit einer Restrukturierung in verschiedenen Bereichen zu reagieren.

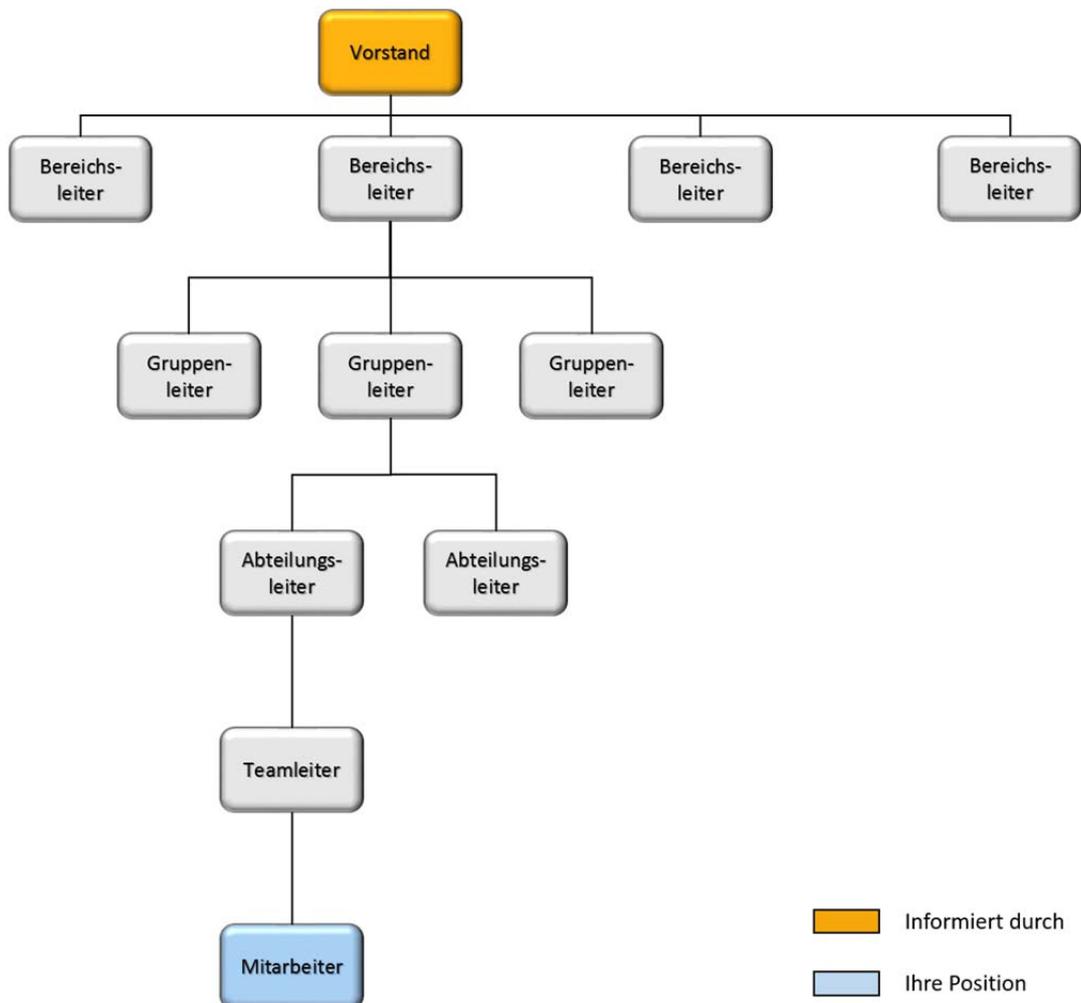
Die Restrukturierung ist für ihr Unternehmen eine große Veränderung und die größte, die Sie bisher in der Organisation miterlebt haben.

## A5. Social Distance Manipulations

### High Social Distance

Der Vorstand Ihres Unternehmens hat Sie und alle anderen MitarbeiterInnen heute per Email über die kommenden Veränderungsmaßnahmen in Ihrem Unternehmen informiert. Den Vorstand kennen Sie lediglich von einigen wenigen Informationsveranstaltungen, bei denen mehrere tausend MitarbeiterInnen anwesend waren.

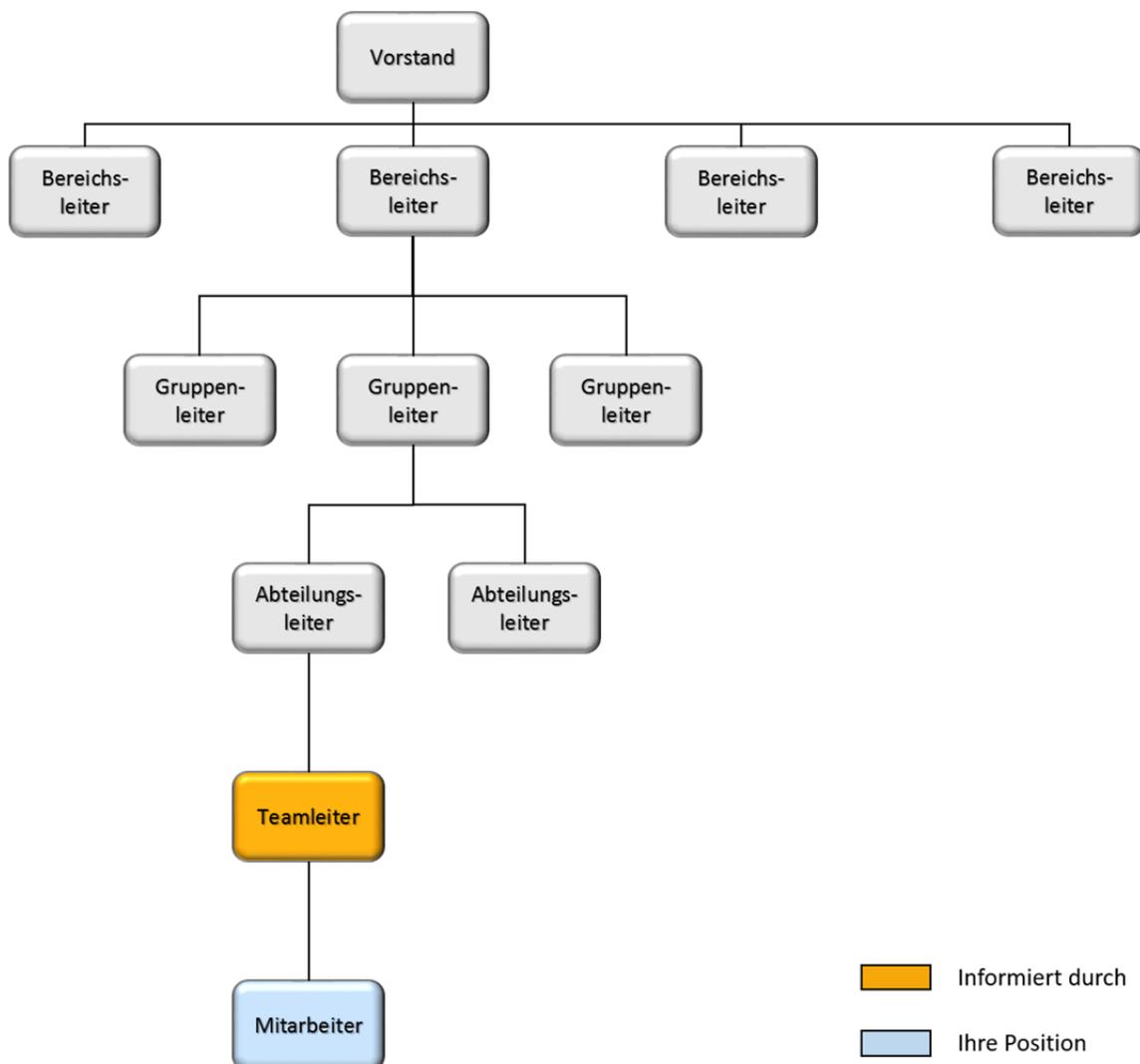
Hier ist ein Organigramm, in dem Ihre Position sowie die des Vorstands gekennzeichnet sind:



## Low Social Distance

Ihre direkte Führungskraft, mit der Sie täglich zusammen arbeiten, hat Sie heute persönlich über die kommenden Veränderungsmaßnahmen in Ihrem Unternehmen informiert. Sie sitzen im gleichen Büro wie Ihre Führungskraft und arbeiten täglich eng mit ihr zusammen.

Hier ist ein Organigramm, in dem Ihre Position sowie die Ihrer Führungskraft gekennzeichnet sind:



## **A6. Study 2: Message Abstractness Manipulations**

### **High Abstractness**

In den letzten Wochen habe ich viele von Ihnen um sehr ehrliches Feedback gebeten – individuell und in kleinen Gruppentreffen. Sie haben deutlich gemacht, dass wir es in Zukunft schaffen müssen, unsere Arbeit einfacher zu machen. Wenn wir auch im nächsten Jahrzehnt erfolgreich sein wollen, müssen sich Erfolge für unseren Kunden schneller zeigen.

Unsere Strategie für die nächsten zehn Jahre ist solide. Einige Aspekte unserer operativen Umsetzung sind es allerdings nicht. Wir müssen uns daher auf die Zukunft vorbereiten, indem wir in den kommenden Jahren einige Veränderungen durchführen. Diese Veränderungen werden sich an einigen einfachen Prinzipien orientieren:

1. Wir werden nichts richten, was nicht kaputt ist. Es gibt zahlreiche Bereiche, in denen wir bereits exzellent für unsere Kunden arbeiten. Wir werden Ihrem Erfolg in diesen Bereichen nicht in die Quere kommen.
2. Wir werden mutige Schritte gehen und harte Entscheidungen treffen. Mit dem Wandel werden auch notwendige Veränderungen in unserem Arbeitsalltag kommen, und Sie werden diese Veränderungen in Zukunft daran erkennen, dass wir wichtige Entscheidungen rechtzeitig, zielorientiert und messbar treffen.
3. Wir werden unsere Marktführerschaft in unseren Kernbereichen weiter ausbauen. Auch hier gilt: An unserer Strategie, die Bedeutung von Netzwerken im nächsten Jahrzehnt weiter auszubauen, wird sich nichts ändern. Was sich ändern wird, ist unser Verständnis von Führung.
4. In der Zukunft möchten wir es einerseits für Sie einfacher machen, hier zu arbeiten und andererseits für unsere Kunden und Partner einfacher machen, mit uns zu arbeiten. Wir

werden die Art und Weise, wie wir arbeiten, vereinfachen sowie unsere Aufmerksamkeit und Ressourcen fokussieren.

Wir alle sind dafür verantwortlich, operative Exzellenz zu erreichen. Ich bitte jeden von Ihnen, seinen Teil dazu beizutragen, diese Veränderung ins nächste Jahrzehnt zu tragen. Es wird nicht einfach werden und ich erwarte von Ihnen Mitarbeit, Flexibilität und Feedback auf diesem Weg. Ich bin bereit, und ich weiß, dass Sie es auch sind.

Vielen Dank, dass Sie ein Teil dieser Organisation sind. Sie haben meinen Respekt und meine Anerkennung. Lassen Sie uns diese Veränderung gemeinsam gestalten und erfolgreich durchführen. Dies ist unsere Möglichkeit, das Netzwerk der Zukunft zu gestalten.

## Low Abstractness

In den letzten Wochen habe ich viele von Ihnen um sehr ehrliches Feedback gebeten – ich habe mit einzelnen Kollegen aus allen unseren fünf Geschäftsfeldern gesprochen, außerdem gab es kleine Gruppentreffen mit Mitarbeitern aus verschiedenen Abteilungen, zum Beispiel Marketing und Personal. Sie haben deutlich gemacht, dass Ihr Arbeitsalltag momentan zu komplex ist und wir es schaffen müssen, unsere Arbeit einfacher zu machen. Wenn wir auch weiterhin erfolgreich sein wollen, müssen sich Erfolge für unseren Kunden schneller zeigen. Unsere grundsätzliche Strategie ist solide. Einige Aspekte unserer operativen Umsetzung sind es allerdings nicht. Daran wollen wir arbeiten, indem wir in den kommenden Wochen einige Veränderungen durchführen. Diese Veränderung wird vier konkrete Maßnahmen beinhalten

1. Unsere weltweite Präsenz wird noch in diesem Jahr in drei geografische Regionen eingeteilt: (a) USA, (b) Europa, mittlerer Osten und Afrika, und (c) Asien-Pazifik Raum. Diese werden unabhängig voneinander arbeiten, damit wir uns besser an unseren Kundenbedürfnissen orientieren können.
2. Wir wollten nicht mehr einzelne Produkte, sondern ganze Lösungen verkaufen. Für uns heißt das, dass wir unsere einzelnen Produkte zu Kombiangeboten bündeln: statt einzelner Router verkaufen wir unseren Kunden ein funktionierendes Netzwerk für das ganze Unternehmen.
3. Unsere Produktion wird in zwei Bereiche mit jeweils einem Gruppenleiter unterteilt. Diese Maßnahme erhöht unsere Innovationsfähigkeit und ermöglicht es uns, uns auf unser Kerngeschäft zu konzentrieren.
4. Ab morgen werden wir damit beginnen, die Anzahl der Entscheidungsgremien von über 23 auf 5 zu reduzieren. Damit möchten wir es Ihnen ermöglichen, schnellere Entscheidungen treffen zu können.

Wir alle sind dafür verantwortlich, diese vier Maßnahmen erfolgreich umzusetzen. Bringen Sie sich ein, indem Sie Ihre Ideen zur Vereinfachung unserer Arbeitsabläufe einbringen oder sich in einer der Arbeitsgruppen engagieren. Sie können mir auch eine Nachricht mit Ihrer Meinung schicken. Ich weiß, dass Ihre Arbeit oft anstrengend genug ist. Seien Sie trotzdem bereit für die Veränderung. Ich bin es jedenfalls bereits!

Vielen Dank, dass Sie ein Teil dieser Organisation sind. Sie haben meinen Respekt und meine Anerkennung. Lassen Sie uns diese Veränderung gemeinsam gestalten und erfolgreich durchführen. Dies ist unsere Möglichkeit, unser Unternehmen und damit ihren Arbeitsplatz neu zu gestalten.

## **Appendix B**

### **B1. Interview Questions for Each of the Four Phases**

- Wie wird die Phase von den Mitarbeitern erlebt? Welches Informationsbedürfnis haben sie?
- Welche Inhalte und Botschaften sollten in den Vordergrund gestellt werden? Gibt es Inhalte, auf die nicht eingegangen werden sollte?
- Welche Strategien, den Mitarbeitern Informationen, die die Veränderung betreffen, näher zu bringen, halten Sie in dieser Phase für besonders geeignet?

## B2. Phase Model Used for Illustration in Interviews

