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## Strategies to influence meaning creation to address resistance in a change initiative

Rebecca L. Escobar

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**STRATEGIES TO INFLUENCE MEANING CREATION TO ADDRESS  
RESISTANCE IN A CHANGE INITIATIVE**

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**A Research Project  
Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graziadio Business School  
Pepperdine University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science  
In  
Organization Development**

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**by  
Rebecca L. Escobar**

**July 2023**

This research project, completed by

REBECCA L. ESCOBAR

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio Business School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

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Faculty Committee

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Committee Chair, Gary Mangiofico, Ph. D.

---

Committee Member, Ann Feyerherm, Ph. D.

---

Deborah Crown, Ph.D., Dean  
The Graziadio Business School

## **Abstract**

Organizational change has been a constant and essential aspect of human societies for centuries, driving innovation and adaptability. However, despite the abundance of models and content on managing change, organizations still struggle to implement and sustain effective transformations. This research aims to address this challenge by exploring strategies to create meaning and address resistance during transformational change. The research will employ a qualitative approach, conducting 15 interviews to capture participants' experiences and strategies in influencing meaning creation during change initiatives. The data collected will be transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed for themes, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed. The findings provide insights into the strategies employed to effectively influence meaning creation in a change initiative and highlight the importance of being agile, understanding the impacted audience, utilizing storytelling, tailoring change rollouts, building a diverse community of influencers, and providing choice.

*Keywords:* organizational change, effective transformations, meaning creation

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

For centuries, external change has been a central factor that propels innovation and fuels adaptability (Brown et al., 2009). The Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who lived in 500 BCE, noted a saying: “The only constant in life is change” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019). According to Daft (2020), all organizations experience change regardless of their vertical, employee size, or growth stage. However, with change being a constant for so many centuries, why do we still struggle? Hundreds of models and content exist in business and within organizations and teams on how to effectively manage change, lead through change, process change, and impact change. So why do we still fall short? Why is change often unsustainable? Furthermore, what strategies can be implemented to create meaning in a transformational change to reduce resistance and foster effective and sustainable change in groups?

Organizational change is an inevitable aspect of the modern business landscape. Organizations recognize the need to adapt and evolve to remain competitive and responsive to external factors. According to Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), it is common for organizations to undergo a major organizational change approximately every five years, while minor changes occur annually. These changes can take various forms, including structural reorganizations, process improvements, cultural shifts, or the adoption of new technologies.

The drivers behind organizational change are diverse and multifaceted. One significant factor is the dynamic nature of the external environment in which organizations operate. Climate, market conditions, political systems, and legal frameworks can significantly impact an organization's operations and necessitate strategic

adjustments. For instance, new regulations or shifts in consumer preferences may require organizations to reevaluate their processes or product offerings. Furthermore, industry competition can pressure organizations to innovate and differentiate themselves (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008).

According to Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), internal factors within an organization also drive change. Workforce dynamics, for instance, can create the need for organizational adaptations. Workforce changes may result from retirements, talent shortages, or the introduction of new generations with different expectations and work styles. Technological advances often act as catalysts for change as organizations seek to leverage new tools and platforms to enhance productivity, streamline operations, or better serve their customers.

Despite recognizing the importance of organizational change, many senior leaders express dissatisfaction with the outcomes of these initiatives. Research by Erwin and Garman (2010) indicates that senior leadership often characterizes organizational change efforts as ineffective, unsuccessful, or failing to achieve sustained improvement. This sentiment is supported by empirical evidence, as studies suggest that around 70% of all change measures fail (Miller, 2004; Nohria & Beer, 2015).

Resistance to change remains the main reason for failure in even the most thought-out organizational shifts (Erwin & Garman, 2010). According to a study conducted by Erwin and Garman (2010) that surveyed 400 organizations, resistance to change emerged as the primary cause of failure in organizational change initiatives. Bovey and Hede (2001) also referenced multiple studies, including one involving 500 Australian organizations, which identified resistance as the predominant challenge faced

by management when implementing change. However, the challenge of overcoming resistance to organizational or personal change is not new.

One of the earliest models addressing change and acknowledging resistance was Lewin's Three-Stage Model (1947), which explored the change model of unfreezing, moving, and freezing when influencing organizational change. Lewin believed that changing people's attitudes or behaviors is comparable to challenging deeply ingrained customs or social habits. He referred to these social habits as significant barriers to change as inner resistance. To overcome this inner resistance, Lewin (1947) argued that an additional force is required, powerful enough to disrupt the habit or unfreeze the established custom (Burnes & Bargal, 2017).

Ford and Ford (2008) stated, "Resistance, properly understood as feedback, can be an important resource in improving the quality and clarity of the objectives and strategies at the heart of a change proposal. And, properly used, it can enhance the prospects for successful implementation" (p. 103). This highlights that as it relates to sensemaking, the change agent can facilitate conversations surrounding the change to effectively address and address the resistance that may be observed (Matos & Esposito, 2014, Pieterse et al., 2012)

Crossan (2003) identified forces driving resistance to change as the central component in the failure of intentional change efforts. Wilson (2019) summarized various works on change resistance, including organizational culture, defensive routines, lack of trust, opposing views, and a low tolerance for change as critical influencers for resistance to planned change. Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) synthesized individual resistance into four common elements: a desire not to lose something of value, a misunderstanding of

the change and its impacts, a belief that the change does not make sense for the organization, and a low tolerance for change.

The impact of resistance to change is a lack of sustainability. Sustainability relating to change implies that new methods of operating and performing are sustained until the desired outcome is reached (Buchanan et al., 2005). However, sustained change is not always beneficial for organizations when that sustained change interferes with further innovation. Buchanan et al. (2005) highlight the importance of change decay if working practices and performance targets are obsolete. If not consistently evaluated, change sustainability may block other potentially more significant innovations and prevent growth.

Failed change initiatives can have numerous consequences, such as significant business financial losses. This includes expenses incurred in implementing the change, such as investments in new systems, technologies, or training programs. Additionally, failed initiatives may lead to wasted resources, inefficiencies, and disruptions to normal operations, all of which can have financial implications. Additionally, failed change initiatives can negatively impact productivity, employee morale, and satisfaction. When employees witness multiple unsuccessful attempts at change, it can erode trust in leadership and create a sense of disillusionment. This can increase employee turnover, as individuals may seek opportunities elsewhere that offer more stability and a better work environment. Lastly, failed change initiatives can hinder an organization's ability to adapt to evolving market conditions, customer preferences, or industry trends. This lack of adaptability can result in a competitive disadvantage, as competitors who successfully implement change may gain a strategic edge.

All this leads to the research question: "What strategies can be implemented to create and influence meaning creation to address resistance?"

Chapter 2 will present a comprehensive review of the relevant literature pertaining to the research question. It examines and analyzes existing scholarly works, theories, and empirical studies related to the topic. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology employed in the study. It provides a detailed description of the research approach, including the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. Chapter 4 focuses on the analysis of the study results and the presentation of key findings. It describes the data analysis process, including any analysis techniques employed. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the study's findings, their significance, and their implications. It provides an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the results, relating them back to the research question and objectives. The chapter discusses the implications of the findings in the context of the broader literature. Finally, the chapter concludes by summarizing the main findings, highlighting their contributions to the field, and reflecting on the limitations and strengths of the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

“Change is disturbing when it is done to us, exhilarating when it is done by us” (Kanter, 1983, p. 63). This chapter focuses on the review of studies and research relating to change models and constructs. Although there is an immense amount of literature available on change as a whole, the main objective of this chapter is to identify the limitations and opportunities of foundational change models, distinguish influencers of resistance, and investigate how meaning is created and influenced.

### Overview of Change Models

Often, when a change initiative is on the horizon, a change agent first looks toward available change models to guide the reduction of resistance. There are numerous change models available. However, there needs to be more research on the most widely accepted change management models (Todnem, 2005). Many available change models still in use today fall into the planned approach philosophy. Two change models were regularly referenced in the literature: Lewin’s three-step model (1947) and Kotter’s eight-step model (2012) (Bose, 2020; Burnes, 2004, 2009; Mohiuddin & Mohteshamuddin, 2020; Siegal & Church, 1996; Todnem, 2005; Wan et al., 2019).

Lewin’s Three Step Model (1947) to manage change is considered one of the original change models (Bose, 2020; Burnes, 2004, 2009; Cummings et al., 2016; Wan et al., 2019). His model believes that for a change in an organization to be successful, it must consist of three stages: unfreezing, implementing change, and then refreezing. The first stage, unfreeze, refers to the process of disrupting the current action created by both positive (driving) forces and negative (restraining) forces in the organization (Lewin, 1947). The second stage of unfreezing is an attempt to create motivation to grow one's

understanding or openness to change (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 1999). The last refreezing stage is setting the new behavior and stabilizing the group (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 1999).

Though Lewin (1947) is considered the founding father of change management (Cummings et al., 2016), his model has received scrutiny as overly simplistic and not considering the dynamic nature of change (Cummings et al., 2016; Dawson, 1994; Rizwan et al., 2012). According to Lewin, the critical success factors related to change management are reducing the impact of factors restraining the change and increasing the effect of factors driving the change. Dawson (1994) argued that Lewin's theories of planned change in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world where an organization needs to be constantly innovating and adjusting are too simplistic. Kanter et al. (1992) also argued that organizations are fluid and criticized Lewin's (1947) model as too simplistic and inappropriate to compare organizations to ice cubes.

Kotter's Eight-Step Process for Leading Change (Kotter 2007, 2012) consists of eight steps to transform an organization: (1) establish a sense of urgency for the change; (2) create a powerful guiding coalition; (3) develop a vision; (4) over-communicate the vision; (5) remove barriers; (6) create short-term wins; (7) Wait to declare victory; and (8) anchor new change in the corporate culture. Kotter's change model has shown high use in many higher education and medical environments (Chen, 2021; Mohiuddin & Mohteshamuddin, 2020; Wentworth et al., 2020). Several articles on implementing Kotter's change management approach showed mixed success, specifically around engagement in driving and maintaining the change. Chen (2021) used Kotter's (2012) approach to drive participation by faculty in curriculum development, heavily reinforcing the use of incentive programs to drive participation. While participation increased, it was

unclear if incentive programs, such as yearly performance appraisals, were removed if the engagement in the change would remain sustained. This called into question how engaged in the change the participants were.

Another example of lack of engagement was in Wentworth et al. (2020), who used Kotter's (2012) model to implement a new student evaluation tool. The model emphasizes change agents and coalitions to drive the change. However, there were challenges when change agents in leadership turned over or left the organization. This impacted the change because, with the loss of the change agents, there needed to be more broad engagement to drive it forward with the same velocity. Additionally, in the units considered more siloed from the rest of the organization, resistance to change was still met even after following Kotter's (2012) change process (Wentworth et al., 2020).

Mohiuddin and Mohteshamuddin (2020), after conducting a critical review of Kotter's (2012) cyclical change model, concluded that the model did not provide specific enough support on how to engage people in the change. Layering complementary tools to guide enabling and engaging a diverse and distributed leadership team and developing a compelling vision story was a recurring necessity when implementing Kotter's (2012) model (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Mohiuddin & Mohteshamuddin, 2020).

The challenge with Lewin's (1947) and Kotter's (2012) models is that they assume that organizational change and people are predictable, and that change is easy to implement if a series of steps are planned and managed well (Bose, 2020). Additionally, the literature on these models focuses on change within the group, with very little written about the change that must occur within the individual. While Lewin's (1947) model emphasizes the need to unfreeze existing behaviors and refreeze new behaviors within the

group, it does not extensively address the psychological and emotional processes individuals go through during change. Similarly, Kotter's (2012) model focuses on creating a sense of urgency, forming coalitions, and implementing change at the organizational level but does not delve into the individual experiences and challenges associated with change. The reality is that organizational change is fundamentally driven by individual change. Each employee within an organization experiences their own reactions, emotions, and psychological processes when faced with change.

Examination of the literature suggests that two of the most widely used and foundational change management models operate in a static manner that is not conducive to the dynamic world we live in today. Additionally, they are limited in successfully engaging people in change, nor do they account for the change that must be sparked in the individual to reduce the resistance to the change. Bushe (2013) and Miller (2004) captured these limitations in their assertion that creating sustainable change goes beyond simply executing a series of steps. You cannot plan it like a project; it requires broad commitment and willingness from the people to change and sustain the change individually and as a group (Bushe, 2013; Miller, 2004).

### **Resistance to Change**

Change at its core is to alter something, which essentially means adjusting something that once was predictable. Heider (1958) and Kelley (1972) assert that adjusting that predictability creates uncertainty in people, interfering with our ability to predict outcomes and ultimately driving resistance. Del Val and Fuentes (2003) identified five broader forms of resistance adapted from Rumelt (1995) throughout the formulation and implementation stage of a change initiative. In the Formulation stage, they are (a) a

lack of alignment of the perception of the need for the change, (b) low motivation for change, and (c) a lack of creative response. In the Implementation stage, they are (d) political and cultural deadlocks and a combination of (e) inaction due to poor project planning, cynicism, and a lack of resources or skills. However, some of these forms only address the observable behaviors of resistance in individuals or groups but fail to delve into the inner motivators or causes behind them. Del Val and Fuentes (2003) observed that the most powerful source of resistance was addressing individuals' deep-rooted values, which are part of the political and cultural deadlocks category. Del Val and Fuentes (2003) recommend assessing how aligned the change is to the cultural values and focus on what could be done to improve the fit of the change initiative to align more with the culture yet did not address how to successfully implement the change if it was necessary for it to be counter to the current culture.

In a review of 18 peer-reviewed articles dating from 1998 to 2009 addressing the resistance to change in individuals in the context of organizations, several themes emerged around temperament, belief in the change, and perception of the change, as it related to resistance (Erwin & Garman, 2010). Though the focus of these articles was not on how to create meaning for individuals in the change, their findings further highlight the delta between how resistance manifests and where the change models address resistance. Oreg (2003) studied personality characteristics believed to influence individuals toward resisting change. Through a self-survey study of faculty and students at Cornell University, he created a scale of measurement of temperament tendencies associated with resistance to change. He found the temperaments which influenced resistance included a tendency to be routine-driven, a short-term focus, and an

opinionated or rigid point of view. Giangreco and Peccei (2005) surveyed 359 Italian managers at an electric company examining the correlation between the influence of a person's perceptions of the benefits of change as it relates to their stance towards change. Giangreco and Peccei (2005) and Oreg (2006) reported that individuals' apprehension and beliefs of the impacts and outcomes of change influenced their reactions to change.

Wanberg and Banas (2000) explored the influence of personal resilience and its impact on change, finding that those with self-described high levels of resilience were more likely to accept change. However, it was not a predictor of their feelings or reactions evoked by a change. Judge et al. (1999) surveyed 514 managers in six global distributed organizations on two constructs attributed to the person's disposition: self-concept and risk tolerance. The self-concept refers to the individual's self-esteem or positive self-view, and risk tolerance refers to their openness to ambiguity. They found that these disposition constructs were positively related to an individual's success in coping with organizational change.

Bovey and Hede (2001) surveyed 615 Australian employees across nine organizations examining the relationship between employees' openness to change and their adaptive and maladaptive defense mechanisms. They found that those with a higher maladaptive projection tendency and negative or irrational thoughts about the change were significantly more likely to resist change. Lastly, they found that the individual's perception of or feelings about the change's impact had a more significant association with resistance.

Perhaps most interesting was the importance of the intrapersonal aspects around meaning creation related to resistance woven through the literature. It was present in

three central observations. The first is that sources of resistance are dynamic. Resistance may occur in employees' emotions and behaviors or influence what they believe to be true (Erwin & Garman, 2010). This finding gives additional voice and another layer of granularity to Del Val and Fuentes' (2003) findings on resistance rooted in values, which are the ideals that influence and shape people's behavior (Cummings & Worley, 2014). The literature also argued that employees do not resist change but the possible outcomes of that change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Oreg (2006) describes a "tridimensional attitude toward change" (p. 76) to capture resistance's dynamic and multifaceted nature more adequately. These dimensions of resistance consisted of cognitive, affective, and behavioral perspectives. The cognitive dimension captures how an individual conceptualizes the change regarding possible tangible outcomes around the value added or lost, at its core, the meaning the individual creates around the change. The affective dimension is associated with how one emotionally feels about the change. The behavioral dimension connects how an individual responds to the change through behavior.

The second central observation was the importance of the individual's narrative. The perceived implications, outcomes, and execution of a change influence an individual's meaning they make of the change and, therefore, their reaction to the change (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Oreg (2006). Chreim (2006) identified that the person's narrative, or belief, of the change effort significantly influenced their perception of success. Furst and Cable (2008) found that existing perceptions of the supervisor-employee relationship influenced how the employee interpreted the manager's execution of change. Two studies from an energy company structurally and culturally transforming cited cynicism, a predictor of resistance, of the change initiative being a

reaction to narratives or beliefs formed from the organization's experiences rather than the employee's pre-disposition (Stanley et al., 2005). Oreg (2006) found that the variables that presented significant effects on all three of his dimensions of resistance were the level of trust in those executing the change and social influence through the narratives of those around the employee. This highlights that while there could be factors predisposing individuals to accept or resist change, internal and social narratives have a powerful influence on creating meaning.

The third central observation was the importance of diverse or divergent perspectives as it relates to change. Rather than working to diagnose and mitigate resistance, understanding the resistance's origin allows those perspectives and narratives to reshape the change initiative and impact the quality of the decisions made (Lines, 2004; Mabin et al., 2001). Exploring the meaning behind the resistance and its various forms can open possible weaknesses in the change that would negatively impact the organization (Oreg, 2006; Piderit, 2000). If properly utilized elements driving resistance can benefit organizational learning (Msweli-Mbanga & Potwana, 2006).

The literature connects the importance of personal and group narratives, the social impact of the narratives, and the need for divergent thought when striving to influence the individual to generate meaning in a change. It exposes the deficiencies in change models, which neglect the significance of the change that must occur in the individual. However, the literature did not explicitly review the strategies to influence or create new meaning-making. The following section will explore the literature on meaning or sensemaking, the importance and systems of meaning creation in change, and the constructs rooted in the sensemaking of a change initiative.

## **Generating Meaning in Change**

In the context of change, sensemaking or meaning-making can be defined as “the meaning constructed and reconstructed by the involved parties as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sensemaking allows organizational members to create perceived rational accounts of what, why, and how to interpret a change, thus facilitating action (Maitlis, 2005). Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) argue that meaning creation is most challenging when an event contradicts the individual's worldview.

When a change occurs, “people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system” (Weick, 1993, p. 634). He suggested that disruption or change causes people to revert to familiar ways of responding and operating, influenced by what they perceive as truth. Weick (1993) advocates that this retrogress is influenced by the constructed self-narrative, influenced by past experiences. One way of renewing the feeling of order is to make sense of the crisis by developing a narrative (Boudes & Laroche, 2009). There are multiple supporting findings on the connection the narrative must influence an individual's sense-making of an event (Berry, 2001; Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2000, 2004). However, there is little written on what strategies can influence sensemaking.

Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) assert that the sensemaking of an event happens when one stops trying to comprehend it and focuses on attributing significance to the event was disproved by Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001). After running a study on individuals who lost a loved one, they argue that finding the benefit in the event only shapes the process of emotional adjustment, not meaning creation. Davis and

Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) later concluded that for people to make sense of events, those individuals needed to rebuild their worldviews and argue that future research needs to be done on the meaning-making process and the influences the social context plays.

Stensaker and Falkenberg (2007) conducted a longitudinal study examining the connection between employees across three business units and their responses to organizational change. The study showed that new concepts were most successfully accepted when employees reported a perceived degree of autonomy and when the new idea or change was adapted to the local context. The literature argued the need for more investigation into the strategies and processes through which change agents can influence sensemaking.

Weick (2005) asserted that people are constantly taking part in sensemaking, or meaning-making, of events in everyday life through seven influences: identity construction, retrospection, focused on extracted cues, driven by plausibility, enactive of the environment, and social. Identity construction refers to the experiences that have shaped our lives. When we are influenced by retrospection, we allow those past experiences to shape how we perceive current experiences. To focus on extracted cues, one focuses on specific events or inputs that reinforce their interpretation yet completely disregards other inputs that are incongruent with their interpretation. We then reinforce the focus of extracted cues by relying less on accuracy and instead looking for the plausibility of our perceptions. The perceived environment is something we shape; with it, all the constraints or creations become perceivably real. Lastly, the social element can either feed in or detract from these perspectives or narratives we have made; they are constant data inputs that our narrative is shaped on. As part of his ongoing research,

Weick has advocated the need for further empirical studies that make comprehensive use of the sensemaking influences in a change event (Weick, 2005)

Through the introduction of tools such as appreciative inquiry and social construction, new constructs on change and meaning-making have emerged over the past 40 years (Marshak & Bushe, 2013). Traditional forms of OD, or diagnostic OD, founded on Lewin's (1947) work, are based on improving organizations' functionality by focusing on the functioning of teams through accurate diagnosis, communication is focused on facts or objective reality, and change is episodic and planned (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Marshak & Bushe, 2013).

New approaches (e.g., Constructionist, Social Constructionist, Dialogic), challenge the traditional diagnostic models. These new approaches are rooted in the premise that reality is a construct (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Vall Castelló, 2016). They assert that successful change efforts focus on building meaning in the change by modifying the narrative, which is done through conversations reshaping the personal and social reality (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Marshak & Bushe, 2013; Vall Castelló, 2016). Therefore, when an event occurs, the meaning created is not often observably objective or obvious but results from a subjective intra and interpersonal process of sensemaking (Vall Castelló, 2016).

The constructionist, social constructionist, and dialogical approaches differ in their belief of where the meaning-making is occurring. They range from a focus on the individual versus the social relationships versus a fluid mix of both, all dynamically informing the creation of meaning (Vall Castelló, 2016). Botella and Herrero (2000) and Neimeyer et al. (2006) advocate that our self-narrative is the blueprint for how we sense

make intrapersonally. However, dialogically speaking, the self-narrative is also believed to be influenced by how others see us. Thus, our self-narrative is impacted by both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal. Neimeyer (2006) proposes reviewing the process of influencing the narrative to provide essential information about how meaning and identity are constructed in response to change.

This gives further insight into the complexity of sensemaking and the importance of discovering which strategies are best used to impact the systems that influence sensemaking and further highlights where more traditional forms of change management models are too rigidly focused on processing change, falling short.

### **Summary**

The literature review highlighted the importance of meaning creation in an individual during a change initiative as part of a fundamental need to reduce resistance. However, the research left the opportunity to explore further and more in-depth what strategies can be implemented to create and influence meaning-making in change. This study adds to the breadth of understanding by expanding the research on successful strategies to create and influence meaning-making.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

This chapter describes the methodology used for the research project. To ground the focus of the research, the purpose will be restated, and then a summary of the research approach will be provided. The purpose of this research is to discover if there are ways to reduce an individual's resistance to change by creating meaning. This research asked, what strategies can be implemented to create and influence meaning creation to address resistance? While there was extensive research on the importance of meaning or sensemaking creation in addressing resistance to a change initiative, little was written about the strategies to influence meaning creation.

#### **Study Method**

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative research is a broad term for research methodologies that characterize and analyze participants' experiences, actions, exchanges, and frameworks without statistical procedures or quantification. A qualitative approach for this research was selected for two reasons. First, qualitative research focuses on understanding the meaning and experience of participants' lives (Fossey et al., 2002). The research focused on participants' experiences with change and explored the strategies implemented to create and influence meaning creation in the initiative. With a focus on meaning creation, qualitative research helps explore participants' experiences by focusing on the meaning of those experiences and how they might have changed over time.

Second, with little research done on strategies that influence or generate meaning in change, qualitative research is ideal as it aids in advancing knowledge in poorly understood or complex areas (Fossey et al., 2002). The study needed to operate emergently to discover the subjective realities and social contexts, as understood by the

participants, through open-ended questions and dialogue. Therefore, the phenomenological approach as part of the qualitative research was chosen because it is rooted in philosophy and ideal for describing the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2003).

The most vigorous criticism of the phenomenological approach is whether the methodology can accurately capture the experiences and meanings of experiences rather than the researcher's opinions (Tuffour, 2017). The limitations were addressed by the researcher participating in reflexivity by continuously reflecting on their own biases through journaling and repeating back their meaning created from the discussions, allowing participants to highlight additional or new themes.

The predominant philosophical worldview influencing the study was the constructivist worldview which falls under the umbrella of qualitative research. According to Creswell (2003), constructivism believes individuals seek to understand their worlds and develop subjective meanings. With the primary focus of discovery on how to influence meaning-making around change initiatives, the constructionist worldview considers the complexity of the multiple meanings made, which, if patterns are then discovered, will only reinforce the study's findings.

According to Fossey et al. (2002), qualitative research questions focus principally on three areas: language to explore the course of communication and systems within particular social groups, characterization, and interpretation of subjective meanings of situations and actions; and theory-building through observing patterns and links in qualitative data. Therefore, participants were interviewed over a recorded Zoom meeting and asked to describe their experience, beliefs, and stories of a time they were part of

initiating a change initiative. I asked follow-up questions to uncover the meaning made and shared in the intrapersonal narratives and the interpersonal systems to support the discovery of themes of what strategies influenced meaning creation.

### **Research Site and Participant Selection**

I conducted 15 separate interviews with change management facilitators who had a professional change management leadership role or responsibilities greater than five years and facilitated change efforts still in place two years after completion that impacted 18 or more employees within companies larger than 300 people. Participants were sourced through a recruitment email and provided a consent form, with the option to participate in a 60-minute individual interview conducted over video conference in a location of their choice. The intent of a broader participation group with no recency expectation is to identify trends in strategies used to influence sense-making that are most broadly applicable rather than from one specific industry or point in time.

I used both snowball sampling and maximum variation sampling to ensure rich variation and diversity across participants. The decision to interview 15 participants in this research is justified by the qualitative nature of the study, the goal of achieving in-depth understanding, the use of purposive sampling, and the achievement of data saturation. This sample size allowed for a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences and strategies, providing valuable insights into influencing meaning creation in change initiatives (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

### **Interview Questions**

This research focused on what strategies can be implemented to create and influence meaning creation to address resistance through the qualitative approach in the

form of interviews. The interview questions (Appendix A) were formed to capture the participants' lived experiences in initiating a sustained change initiative and allowed for an informal and relaxed conversational flow. The research question has three main elements: strategies, meaning creation, and addressing resistance. These components guided the development of the interview questions.

Next, the scope of the interview questions was considered. The specific aspects of the research question to explore in the interviews were understanding existing strategies for influencing sensemaking. Two peer reviewers, who met the subject selection criteria, reviewed the interview questions with a focus that each question aims to explore strategies for creating and influencing meaning to address resistance. Then they were refined and revised, ensuring clarity and coherence. Any questions that were not directly aligned with the research question or in support of discovering the participants' lived experience with initiating a change effort were removed, and new questions believed to provide valuable insights were added (Appendix A).

### **Data Collection**

I used maximum variation. The data collection method was individual interviews, allowing participants to express their experiences, perspectives, and meanings in depth. Interview questions were prepared for the data collection process to explore the research topic while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences or views. The open-ended questions provided flexibility to allow for emergent themes and unexpected insights. Data saturation was considered and continuously assessed, which refers to the point at which collecting additional data does not provide new insights or information and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest et al., 2006).

Interviews were recorded through video recording in a location of the participant's choice. Data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative research techniques and assigned codes to reveal themes and categories, summarized, and then reported as a collection of the trends, successes, and challenges related to techniques influencing meaning-making in generating sustainable change.

### **Validity**

I focused on building rapport and trust with participants to create a comfortable and trusting environment for data collection. Rapport was built through active listening, genuine interest, and respect for participants' perspectives. To address researcher bias, I practiced reflexivity by continuously reflecting on their biases, assumptions, and values that may influence data collection and interpretation. I kept reflexive journals to document thoughts and reflections throughout the research process. Lastly, peer debriefing was utilized to provide an external perspective on findings, help identify potential biases, and strengthen the validity of interpretations.

### **Ethics**

All participants were provided an informed consent form, with the option to participate in a 60-minute individual interview. Interviews were scheduled at a convenient time and conducted over video conference. To ensure participants' privacy, it was recommended that participants use a personal email account or device and change their screen name on the video conferencing for the interview. Additionally, participants were encouraged to have access to a private, safe, and comfortable location where they were unlikely to be interrupted. They were informed that they may request breaks at any time or withdraw their participation for any reason.

The participant's identity was kept confidential before, during, and after the research study, and all data was reported at an aggregate level only. All digital recordings or print notes associated with this study were secured. Any potential loss of confidentiality was minimized by securing data in password-protected files on a password-protected computer.

### **Data Analysis**

The 15 interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed for themes. The transcripts served as the primary data source, capturing rich and nuanced accounts of participants' experiences and strategies in influencing meaning creation during change initiatives. The analysis involved a systematic and iterative data coding process, where meaningful information units were identified and assigned descriptive codes. These codes were further organized into categories and themes based on similarities and patterns observed across the data set. The analysis was conducted with careful attention to the context and content of participants' narratives, aiming to capture the essence of their experiences and the strategies employed. Through this analysis process, the study aims to uncover key themes and insights that contribute to understanding the strategies effective in influencing meaning creation in individuals impacted by change initiatives.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the research methodology and discussed the ethical, data collection, data analysis considerations, and rationale for the relevance and limitations of the qualitative and phenomenological approach for this study. Chapter 4 presents the study findings.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

In this chapter, I present the study's results on the strategies influencing meaning creation in times of change. The study investigated how individuals and organizations interpret and respond to change and how various strategies impact the meaning they derive from it. This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the data collected, including qualitative insights and quantitative findings. The study results shed light on the key factors that shape meaning creation during times of change.

### **Participant Profile**

Before delving into the results, an overview of the participants involved in the study is provided. I conducted 15 interviews with change management facilitators with a professional change management leadership role or responsibilities exceeding five years. The participants were chosen based on their involvement in change efforts that were still in place two years after completion and had impacted 18 or more employees within companies larger than 300 people. The recruitment process involved a recruitment email and a consent form, allowing participants to opt into a 60-minute individual interview conducted over video conference in a location of their choice. The study aimed to identify trends in strategies used to influence sense-making that are broadly applicable, transcending specific industries, genders, or points in time.

### **Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative data analysis revealed several themes and patterns related to meaning creation in times of change. The participants' narratives provided rich insights into their experiences and perceptions. Three overarching themes emerged through these interviews: lessons, strategies, and outcomes. Each theme consisted of several

sub-themes that provided more profound insights into the participants' experiences and approaches to influencing meaning in a change initiative. Table 1 highlights the themes that emerged from the data.

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## **Lessons**

### ***Be Agile***

Participants highlighted the importance of agility for change facilitators in approaching change initiatives. The importance of agility while facilitating change was expressed 19 times among seven participants. The measure of agility spanned from times the participants adapted to the specific culture they were working, utilized a combination of rational thinking ("head") and emotional intelligence ("heart"), and frequency they were willing to adjust based on feedback and results. One participant shared their experience in changing “We adjusted, we failed fast. We dropped stuff we thought were really great ideas. And we improved on ideas we thought were totally baked.”

Planning for change was called an oxymoron and a paradox as it requires both tight planning and the ability to be flexible and adjust as needed. One participant drew the metaphor of change being like an egg. They stated,

We need to be structured because we essentially have to project plan, yet we need to be much more open-minded and fluid. Because no change is like the other one, there may be commonalities and patterns, but the egg is a good metaphor for change. We have a hard shell but a lot more fluid inside it. So we have to live with being unable to contain it completely.

### *Understanding the Impacted Audience*

In total, 11 of 15 participants emphasized the importance of understanding the impacted audience when facilitating change initiatives and influencing sensemaking. The comments highlight several key points: engaging with the impacted audience ( $n = 14$ ), understanding the audience's perspectives ( $n = 11$ ), recognizing individual and group differences ( $n = 8$ ), Showcasing value and narrative refinement ( $n = 7$ ), finding common meaning ( $n = 4$ ), and considering identity and group dynamics ( $n = 8$ ).

The need to understand the audience's business context, expectations, and concerns were central to one participant. They acknowledged the importance of knowing employees individually, including their fears and performance issues. One participant shared that they would have team dinners, and “I would listen to the conversations about people's fears and their individual reactions to what we discussed earlier in the day.”

Participants acknowledged that a "one size fits all" approach is ineffective. They understood that people come from diverse backgrounds, have different desires, and face unique challenges. Group-level and individual-level understanding were both essential.

Eight participants shared the importance of understanding the narrative of those impacted by a change initiative. They created a narrative highlighting the team's value and continuously refined it through storytelling. The narrative was carefully tailored to align with the audience's beliefs and was regularly updated for effective delivery.

Understanding that different subgroups may interpret change differently, the facilitators focused on drawing meaning across the entire group and identifying common threads.

In summary, 11 of 15 participants with a comment frequency of 52 underscore the need for change facilitators to approach influencing sense-making in change initiatives by

understanding the impacted audience. This involves engaging with individuals, addressing their fears, understanding their perspectives, identifying stakeholder gains, adapting to individual and group differences, and carefully crafting and refining the narrative to align with their beliefs and needs. Building a sense of community and considering identity dynamics play a crucial role in successful change implementation.

### ***Education***

In total, 10 of 15 participants highlighted the role of education and communication in influencing sense-making during change initiatives. This occurred through addressing doubts ( $n = 32$ ), educating on organizational considerations ( $n = 12$ ), supporting internal change agents with tailored conversation talking points ( $n = 3$ ), and workshops and experiential learning ( $n = 2$ ).

Those internally responsible for the change, often in leadership roles, were provided support, enabling them to have personalized and tailored conversations with employees. Basic talking points were provided, but leaders had the flexibility to adapt and shape the conversations as needed, resulting in a smoother transition with minimal pushback. Workshops were organized for managers and senior groups to engage in experiential learning. This approach allowed participants to personally experience the change process, facilitating a deeper understanding and commitment to the initiative.

### **Strategies**

#### ***Tailoring the Change Rollout***

The study results indicate that 12 of 15 participants used the strategy of tailoring the change rollout to the impacted audience to influence sense-making in the group. They utilized multifaceted communication strategies ( $n = 10$ ), addressed resistance by

understanding concerns ( $n = 11$ ), identified and emphasized the benefits for different stakeholders ( $n = 8$ ), aligned the change with organizational values ( $n = 2$ ), personalized the messaging based on individuals' priorities ( $n = 7$ ), and acknowledged and aligned with existing narratives ( $n = 10$ ). These strategies contributed to a smoother transition and increased acceptance of the change initiative.

Effective communication involved reaching out to individuals who resisted the change to understand their concerns, personalizing the messaging, and tailoring the rollout accordingly. This approach aimed to address specific concerns and increase receptiveness to the change. Understanding the values and priorities of individuals allowed for personalized messaging that highlighted how the change would benefit them. One participant shared that a key strategy was “understanding the thing that is most important to those impacted by the change, and then continuing to tailor the messaging and making it personalized based on that knowledge.” Additionally, there was communication on many platforms, such as shared group dialogue, videos, and weekly memos. This tailored approach made the change more relevant and appealing to individuals, increasing their acceptance and engagement.

Addressing existing narratives was a central component of tailoring communication. Recognizing that individuals have their own narratives and beliefs, the participants understood the importance of aligning the change with those existing narratives. This approach made the change more salient and acknowledged by individuals, increasing their receptiveness to new ideas and minimizing resistance. One participant shared,

Everyone sees the world the way they see it. They have their own narrative of the way things are, they have their own story. So when things happen, if that thing is

congruent with that narrative, they see it and acknowledge it. And when it doesn't align with their narrative, they don't see it, they reject it, and the brain doesn't acknowledge it. And so the secret is understanding, what people believe, what's already currently in place, and how this new thing maps to their own narrative so it's acknowledged

Eight of 12 participants emphasized the importance of storytelling in influencing meaning-making and driving change. Storytelling is seen as a powerful tool for inspiring and engaging teams and influencing leaders to act in new ways. One participant shared that storytelling brings concepts to life and makes them meaningful for people. They “used storytelling as a way to inspire the team,” and it became what was most meaningful to bring the desired future changes to life. By sharing stories of successful outcomes and experiences, storytelling helped to shape the narrative and change perspectives. One participant shared,

Our mind is designed to think in stories; hence the Bible is a parable because that is how humans are designed. Storytelling is how we learn, so the only way to accelerate experiential learning is by hearing somebody else's experience and seeing what resonates or what feels like something you can identify. So storytelling is a more scalable way to influence sensemaking with many people.

### ***Building a Diverse Community of Influencers***

The study results indicate that seven of 15 participants perceived to effectively influence sensemaking by building a diverse community of influencers within the organization. This strategy involved identifying key influencers ( $n = 7$ ), leveraging positive voices ( $n = 3$ ), engaging change champions and agents ( $n = 7$ ), and creating a sense of ownership and participation ( $n = 9$ ). These efforts drove change from within the organization and fostered a more successful adoption of the change initiative.

Identifying key influencers within the organization allowed participants to build momentum in the change. Participants actively searched for untapped talent within the

organization and found ways to involve them in driving change. This approach aimed to utilize the skills and perspectives of individuals who were directly affected by the change initiative. One participant shared their belief in bringing in influencers despite where they sit in the organization: “Trying to find those key influencers and bringing them into the process and be part of the team is essential, even if they're at an end user role and impacted by the change it's incredibly helpful.”

Participants engaged individuals at various levels, including managers, team leads, and individual contributors, from different departments to become change champions or agents. These individuals were involved in the change process, shared information with their teams informally, and were more credible in driving change than the project team or senior leaders. In some cases, a cohort of change agents or champions was formed as part of the more significant change initiative. Participants invested time in developing their skills, such as having courageous conversations and speaking up effectively. One participant reflected on their experience in building a change cohort,

Ideally, there's a cohort of people within the larger change initiatives that are like change agents or champions. And so I would spend time with them on things like the ladder of inference, being able to speak up, and having courageous conversations, but not with everyone that's impacted by the change, only the group that is going to help as change agents.

### ***Providing Choice and Instilling Ownership***

Six of 15 participants used the strategy of providing choice and instilling ownership to influence sense-making in change initiatives. This approach involved offering participants choices ( $n = 2$ ), involving them in co-creation ( $n = 6$ ), looping back in communication ( $n = 3$ ), and creating and shifting ownership to the participants themselves ( $n = 6$ ). These strategies empowered participants, increased their engagement,

and fostered a sense of ownership, ultimately leading to a more successful implementation of the change initiative.

The facilitators focused on ensuring that the change initiative became the work of the participants who would be living with the outcomes of the change rather than being driven by the change facilitators. This sense of ownership increased commitment, responsibility, and motivation for the success of the change initiative. One participant shared, “The key to change management is to create the ownership in the people that are going to be living with what you leave behind in your change.”

Involving the business from the beginning of the change initiative through co-creation empowered them and made them feel like active contributors. This approach increased their sense of ownership and engagement in the change process. Participants gave the internal change agents the opportunity to make choices related to the change, such as deciding the timing of the transition. Providing a sense of control and allowing individuals to have a say in the process increased their buy-in and commitment to the change initiative.

### **Outcomes**

The experience of change facilitators resulted in several positive outcomes. First, five of 15 participants emphasized the creation of deep relationships with stakeholders, which fostered trust, collaboration, and effective communication throughout the change process. All five participants stated building strong relationships contributed to the success of the change initiatives. One participant shared, “the personal relationships were really special. You can see that the impact of your role is more significant than just getting your job done.”

Second, nine of 15 participants expressed satisfaction with their ability to sustain change efforts beyond the initial implementation phase. All nine participants believed they established practices and processes that supported long-term change, ensuring its continuity and effectiveness.

Lastly, six of 15 change management facilitators reported positive impacts on both the business and professional growth of the individuals involved. The change initiatives resulted in beneficial outcomes for the organization as a whole, driving positive business results such as increased stock, profitability, and employee engagement. One participant shared,

We were able to not just increase engagement, but you saw a huge bump in their stock and tangible business performance stuff that came as a direct result of, getting everybody on the same page with what it means to show up here and do a good job. And getting everybody on the same page showed actual business performance change.

Additionally, three participants shared that the internal change agents and influencers involved in the change process experienced professional growth through promotions internally as recognition of the expertise they gained as part of the change facilitation, further enhancing their skills and expertise.

Overall, the experience of change facilitators reported deep relationships, sustained change efforts, and positive business and professional development. These outcomes demonstrate the impact of their change efforts beyond the completion of a change initiative.

### **Summary**

The study results provide valuable insights into the strategies influencing meaning creation in times of change. The qualitative findings emphasize the importance of

narrative, agility, community, and communication in shaping individuals' and organizations' interpretations and responses to change. These findings contribute to our understanding of the factors that can facilitate a more positive and meaningful experience of change for individuals and organizations. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these findings and provide recommendations for practitioners and future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Navigating change is a complex and dynamic process that often requires not only structural adjustments but also careful consideration of the individuals who are impacted by it. Throughout this thesis, I explored the strategies employed to influence meaning creation in individuals during change initiatives. By examining the experiences, perspectives, and insights of both change facilitators and those affected by change, I uncovered valuable insights that shed light on practical approaches to shaping individual interpretations and responses. This final chapter brings critical findings and insights from the research to synthesize the outcomes and discuss their implications for theory, practice, and future research. I aim to contribute to the growing knowledge in meaning creation by offering a comprehensive understanding of the strategies that foster meaningful transitions for individuals impacted by change.

Throughout the discussion, the limitations of the study will be acknowledged, recognizing the potential biases or areas that warrant further investigation. By highlighting these limitations, the hope is to inspire future researchers to build upon the work and delve deeper into the intricacies of influencing meaning creation during change.

### **Summary of Findings**

The research sought to understand what strategies can be implemented to create and influence meaning creation to address resistance. The research yielded several key findings. First, almost half (7/15) of change facilitators emphasized the importance of agility in managing change. Participants acknowledged the paradox of planning for change while maintaining the ability to adjust based on feedback and results. Understanding the impacted audience was another crucial aspect mentioned by a

majority, with participants recognizing the need to engage with individuals, understand their perspectives, address their fears, and carefully craft and refine the narrative to align with their beliefs and needs. Education and communication played a significant role in utilizing data, supporting change agents, and organizing workshops to enhance understanding and engagement.

Strategies participants used to influence meaning creation were tailoring the change rollout by personalizing messaging, addressing resistance, and aligning with existing narratives were effective strategies identified by change facilitators. Building a diverse community of influencers, involving key influencers and change champions, contributed to the successful adoption of change. Providing choice and instilling ownership empowered participants and increased their commitment to the change initiative.

The research outcomes highlighted the creation of deep relationships with stakeholders, sustained change efforts, and positive impacts on both the business and professional growth of the internal change champions involved. Overall, the study contributes valuable insights into the strategies that shape meaning creation during change, offering guidance for practitioners and enriching our understanding of effective change management.

### **Interpretation and Analysis**

The implications of the findings on strategies for influencing meaning creation in individuals impacted by a change initiative are worthy of consideration. These findings are relevant to the research objective of understanding how change facilitators can shape individual interpretations and responses during times of change. Examining the patterns

and trends that emerged from the data collected can provide explanations and interpretations that shed light on the underlying mechanisms and dynamics at play.

One significant implication is recognizing the importance of being agile and having agility in change facilitation. The findings emphasize the need for change facilitators to adapt and adjust their plans and strategies as circumstances evolve. This aligns with the dynamic nature of change initiatives and the complex environment in which they unfold. The participants' experiences and perspectives highlight the necessity of striking a balance between structure and fluidity, recognizing that change cannot be contained entirely but requires careful planning and adapting.

Understanding the impacted audience emerges as an important factor in influencing meaning creation. The findings underscore the significance of engaging with individuals, comprehending their perspectives, and tailoring the change narrative to align with their beliefs and needs. Recognizing individual and group differences is crucial, as it allows change facilitators to address specific concerns, find common meaning, and build a sense of community. The participants' experiences demonstrate the power of understanding the narrative of those impacted by the change and the impact of carefully refining and updating that narrative through storytelling.

The findings highlight the role of education and communication in shaping meaning during change initiatives. Change facilitators can enhance understanding and engagement by utilizing data, providing support to change agents, and organizing workshops. This emphasizes the importance of equipping individuals with the necessary knowledge and resources to navigate the change process successfully. The participants'

experiences demonstrate the effectiveness of educating individuals on organizational considerations and using experiential learning to deepen understanding and commitment.

Patterns and trends related to tailoring the change rollout and building a diverse community of influencers further contribute to the implications of the findings. The participants' insights emphasize the need for personalized messaging, addressing resistance, and aligning with existing narratives to increase acceptance and minimize resistance to change. Additionally, involving key influencers and change champions from different levels and departments fosters a sense of ownership and drives change from within the organization. These patterns suggest a tailored and inclusive approach is essential for the successful adoption of change.

Based on the data collected, these implications can be interpreted as strategies that foster a more positive and meaningful change experience for individuals and organizations. By recognizing and actively addressing individuals' needs, building strong relationships, and approaching change with agility, change facilitators can create an environment and empower those impacted conducive to successful and meaningful change implementation. The findings highlight the positive impacts on business performance and professional growth of those internally involved in championing the change, emphasizing the broader benefits of change.

Overall, these findings contribute to the OD field by offering practical insights and recommendations for practitioners. The identified patterns and trends provide a foundation for future research and further exploration of the strategies influencing meaning creation during change initiatives. By understanding and applying these implications, change facilitators can navigate the complexities of change more

effectively, fostering meaningful transitions and driving successful outcomes for individuals and organizations.

### **Comparison with Previous Research**

The research findings on strategies for influencing meaning creation in individuals impacted by change initiatives align with and contribute to existing literature and studies in the field. They provide valuable insights that complement and expand upon previous work, while also highlighting areas of similarity, difference, or contradiction.

In terms of similarities, the current research findings echo previous studies that emphasize the importance of understanding the impacted audience and tailoring communication to align with their beliefs and needs (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Hawkins, et al., 2008; Timer & Kreuter, 2006). The recognition of individual and group differences and the need for personalized messaging to increase acceptance of change are consistent with prior research on effective change management strategies (Paterson & Cary, 2002). Additionally, the emphasis on building relationships, engaging change champions, and involving key influencers aligns with existing literature highlighting the significance of stakeholder engagement and leadership support in driving successful change (Gilley et al., 2009; Kotter, 2007; Paglis & Green, 2002).

However, there are notable differences and contributions in the current research findings. For instance, the emphasis on agility as a key strategy stands out as a unique contribution. While previous studies have acknowledged the importance of flexibility in managing change (Georgsdottir et al., 2003; Phillips & Wright, 2009), the specific focus on agility as a mindset and approach to influencing meaning creation adds nuance and

depth to the existing literature. The metaphor of change is like an egg, with a hard shell and fluid inside, which offers a fresh perspective on balancing structure and adaptability.

The current research findings shed light on the role of storytelling as a powerful tool for influencing meaning-making and driving change. While storytelling has been recognized in previous studies as a communication technique (Barker & Gower, 2010; Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003; Denning, 2001), the emphasis on its scalability and impact on sensemaking with large groups adds a valuable dimension to the existing knowledge. This highlights the potential for storytelling to foster engagement, inspire teams, and shape the narrative during change initiatives. Contradictions or divergent perspectives between the current research and previous work can also contribute to the overall knowledge in the field. These differences may arise from variations in research contexts, methodologies, or the specific focus of the studies. Identifying and understanding these contradictions can prompt further exploration and refinement of theories and practices in influencing meaning creation during change.

Overall, the current research findings complement and build upon existing literature in the field of change management. They align with previous studies by emphasizing the importance of understanding the audience, tailoring communication, building relationships, and engaging key influencers. Simultaneously, the findings offer unique contributions by highlighting the significance of agility and storytelling as effective strategies. By contextualizing the similarities, differences, and contradictions, the current research enriches the overall knowledge and understanding of how to influence meaning creation in individuals impacted by change initiatives.

## **Implications and Applications**

The research findings on strategies for influencing meaning creation in individuals impacted by change initiatives have broader implications for the field of OD and change facilitation. These implications can drive advancements in theory and practice, guide future research, and offer practical recommendations.

The findings highlight the importance of incorporating agility into change facilitation practices. Recognizing the dynamic nature of change and the need for flexibility, change facilitators can adopt an agile mindset and approach that allows them to adapt plans and strategies as circumstances evolve. This calls for a shift in traditional change management practices, which often rely on rigid and linear approaches. Embracing agility can enhance the responsiveness and effectiveness of change initiatives, leading to more successful outcomes. Thus, the field of OD can benefit from continuing to incorporate agile methodologies and principles into frameworks and models.

The emphasis on understanding the impacted audience and tailoring communication has significant implications for change facilitation. Change facilitators could benefit by investing time and effort in gaining insights into individuals' perspectives, needs, and beliefs and considering group dynamics. This understanding can guide the development of targeted and personalized change strategies that resonate with stakeholders, leading to greater acceptance and engagement. Practitioners in the field of OD should prioritize building strong relationships, engaging change champions, and fostering a sense of community during change initiatives.

Additionally, the findings underscore the power of storytelling as a tool for influencing meaning-making and driving change. Change facilitators can harness the

narrative potential to inspire, engage, and shape the collective understanding of change. Storytelling can be integrated into change communication efforts, workshops, and leadership practices to foster a shared sense of purpose and meaning. This highlights the need for OD practitioners to develop storytelling competencies and incorporate narrative techniques into their change-facilitation toolkit.

The research suggests new avenues for further exploration. Future studies can delve deeper into the role of agility in change facilitation, examining its impact on various dimensions of sensemaking and the effectiveness of different agile methodologies in different contexts. Additionally, further research can investigate the interplay between storytelling and other change facilitation strategies, exploring how storytelling can be integrated with other tools and approaches to enhance sensemaking and engagement.

Based on the results, several practical recommendations can be made. Change facilitators should adopt an agile mindset, embracing flexibility and adaptability in their approach to change initiatives. They should invest in understanding the impacted audience's unique perspectives, needs, and beliefs and tailor their communication accordingly. Integrating storytelling as a central element in change facilitation efforts can foster engagement, inspire teams, and shape the narrative of the change. Additionally, practitioners should prioritize building relationships, engaging change champions, and creating a sense of stakeholder ownership and participation.

In conclusion, the research findings have potential implications for change facilitation. By emphasizing agility, understanding the impacted audience, and leveraging storytelling, the field can advance its understanding and practice of influencing meaning creation during change initiatives. The identified implications call for a shift in traditional

change management approaches and highlight the need for new competencies and approaches in OD practice. Further research and implementing practical recommendations can contribute to the continuous improvement and effectiveness of change facilitation efforts in organizations.

### **Reflection and Critique**

The research demonstrated several strengths in the methodology employed. The selection of a qualitative approach, specifically the phenomenological approach, aligns well with the research objective of exploring participants' experiences and the strategies used to influence meaning creation in change initiatives. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, capturing their subjective meanings and lived experiences. The use of open-ended questions in interviews further facilitated the exploration of participants' narratives and insights.

### **Limitations**

I made efforts to address potential limitations and biases. Through continuous self-reflection and journaling, reflexivity was used to acknowledge and manage the researcher's biases and assumptions. This self-awareness is crucial in qualitative research to ensure the participants' perspectives are accurately represented and interpreted. Peer debriefing was employed to gain external perspectives, provide validation, and identify potential biases or areas for improvement in the interpretation of findings.

The research process demonstrated ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, and handling data securely. These practices contribute to the trustworthiness and integrity of the study.

However, there are some limitations and potential sources of error to consider. The use of snowball sampling and maximum variation sampling may introduce a degree of bias, as participants were recruited through professional connections. This could result in a lack of diversity or potential biases in the sample. To mitigate this limitation, efforts were made to ensure rich variation and diversity across participants, but there is still a possibility of inherent biases in the selection process.

Another limitation is the reliance on participants' self-reported experiences and interpretations, which may be subject to memory recall or social desirability biases. To address this, I encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and engage in open dialogue to uncover deeper insights. However, it is important to acknowledge that individual perspectives still influence the interpretation of experiences and may not capture the complete objective reality.

To improve the research process, future studies could consider a more diverse sampling strategy, including participants from different industries, organizational sizes, and cultural backgrounds. This would enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings. Additionally, incorporating multiple data collection methods, such as observations or document analysis, could provide triangulation and further validate the research findings. Additionally, understanding the perspectives of those directly impacted by the change would add a rich addition to more clearly identifying strategies that influence meaning creation.

In conclusion, the research employed a suitable qualitative methodology to explore participants' experiences and strategies for influencing meaning creation in change initiatives. The methodology's strengths include its focus on subjective meanings,

open-ended questions, reflexivity, and ethical considerations. However, limitations such as sampling bias and reliance on self-reported data should be acknowledged. Overall, by addressing these limitations and considering potential areas for improvement, future research can further enhance the understanding of strategies to influence meaning creation and contribute to the field of change facilitation.

### **Conclusion and Closure**

In summary, the research sought to explore participants' lived experiences applying strategies for influencing meaning creation in change initiatives. The significance of the research lies in advancing knowledge in the poorly understood or complex area of influencing meaning creation in change initiatives. By focusing on participants' experiences and strategies, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how change facilitators can effectively influence sensemaking. The findings provide insights into the strategies employed: being agile, understanding the impacted audience, utilizing storytelling, tailoring change rollouts, building a diverse community of influencers, and providing choice.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the field of OD and the practice of change facilitation by shedding light on the strategies that influence meaning creation in individuals impacted by change initiatives. Future research can build upon these findings and explore additional avenues. Unanswered questions include the impact of the strategy's effectiveness in different organizational contexts or cultural settings. Further exploration could also investigate the role of emotions in meaning creation during change and the influence of organizational leadership on the implementation of strategies.

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**Table 1**  
***Summarized Themes***

Themes	Sub Themes	N	Frequency
Lessons	Be Agile: Participants emphasized the importance of flexibility and adaptability in managing change. They acknowledged the need to adjust plans and strategies as circumstances evolved and to respond to unexpected challenges.	7	19
	Understanding the Impacted Audience: Participants recognized the significance of comprehending the narrative of those affected by the change. They highlighted the value of creating opportunities, such as listening sessions, for individuals to express their concerns and be heard.	11	52
	Education: Participants emphasized the importance of educating both change drivers and those impacted by the change. They recognized the need to provide information and resources to support individuals' understanding and engagement with the change initiative. Participants found storytelling to be a powerful tool in influencing sense-making.	10	49
Strategies	Tailoring the Change Rollout: Participants frequently discussed the importance of tailoring change initiatives to suit the specific audience. This involved seeking out resistance, addressing it proactively, and employing multifaceted communication approaches to ensure messages were effectively conveyed.	12	48
	Building a Diverse Community of Influencers: Participants highlighted the value of cultivating a diverse group of influencers within the organization to drive the change internally. These influencers played a crucial role in advocating for the change, encouraging others to embrace it, and fostering a sense of ownership.	7	26
	Providing Choice and Instilling Ownership: Participants recognized the benefits of providing individuals with choices and opportunities for ownership in the change process. Empowering employees to have a say in implementing the change	6	17

	increased their investment and commitment to its success.		
Outcomes	Creation of Deep Relationships: Participants highlighted the development of deep relationships with various stakeholders as a positive outcome of their change management efforts. Building trust and rapport facilitated effective collaboration and communication throughout the change process.	5	7
	Sustained System: Participants expressed satisfaction with their ability to create change efforts sustained beyond the initial implementation phase. This outcome reflected their successful navigation of challenges and establishing of practices and processes supporting long-term change.	9	7
	Positive Business and Professional Change: Change management facilitators reported positive impacts on both the business and professional growth of individuals involved	6	8

## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

This study aims to explore what strategies influence meaning-making in change initiatives. Specifically, I seek to understand people's lived experience of implementing change, what they learned from it, and what role meaning-making may have played in the process. Exploring these questions may provide insights into how individuals can increase learning in facilitating sustained change.

#### Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your experience in leading a change initiative?
2. What were some of your typical thoughts, approaches, strategies, and behaviors while leading the change initiative?
3. What were the most effective strategies you used to build meaning with participants impacted by the change initiative? what were the most surprising outcomes?
4. What did you learn from leading this change initiative?
5. What longer-term impacts has this experience had on you, and how would you personally recommend to others to manage change initiatives?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to share relevant to this experience that speaks to the strategies for influencing meaning-making?

## **Appendix B: Recruitment Email**



Dear [name],

My name is Rebecca Escobar, and I am a master's degree student in the Organization Development department of the Graziadio Business School at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study **to explore what strategies influence meaning-making in change initiatives**. Specifically, I seek to understand people's lived experience of implementing change, what they learned from it, and what strategies they learned to influence the sensemaking in individuals impacted by change to aid in the adoption of the change, and I need your help!

I am seeking volunteer study participants who have driven a change initiative that sustained once complete for two or more years impacting 30 or more people at a company with 300 or more employees.

If you meet these criteria, I would like to invite you to participate in a 1-hour [recorded] video conference interview in a location of your choice to discuss your experience. Interview questions will focus on your lived experience, including thoughts, feelings, and learnings. The focus is explicitly not on change processes but on the strategies that impact the meaning creation of the change, and all participants will be asked not to share any company information that is not publicly available.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity as a participant will be protected before, during, and after the time that study data is collected. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The results of our interviews will be confidential and reported at the aggregate summary level only.

Please respond to this email confirming or declining your interest in participating in this study.

Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,  
Rebecca Escobar

Pepperdine University  
Graziadio Business School  
Masters in Organization Development

**Appendix C: Subject Consent Form**



**IRB Protocol Number: 23-02-2087**

**Study Title: Strategies to Influence Meaning Creation in Change**

**Authorized Study Personnel:**

**Principal Investigator: Rebecca Escobar | Mobile: 408-644-0066**

**Faculty Chair/ Sponsor: Dr. Gary Mangiofico | Mobile: 949-351-3700**

### **Key Information**

- If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:
- Sharing your experience in implementing a change initiative and the strategies that were most successful in influencing meaning-making.
- You will be asked to participate in one ~60-minute individual interview
- There are minimal risks associated with this study
- Your identity will be kept confidential before, during, and after the research study, and all data will be reported at an aggregate level only
- You will not be paid for your participation
- You will be provided with a copy of this consent form

### **Invitation**

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

### **Why are you being asked to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you have implemented a change initiative that sustained for two or more years that impacted 18 or more employees within a company of 300 people or more.

Because you meet these criteria, your experiences are relevant to the focus of this study.

### **What is the reason for doing this research study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore what strategies help influence meaning-making in a change initiative. Specifically, I seek to understand people's lived experiences of implementing successful change, what they learned from it, and what strategies they found successfully influenced the meaning-making of the change. Exploring these questions may provide insights into how individuals and corporations can increase the effectiveness of change initiatives and will build on current academic research that is largely focused on the failures of change initiatives and their impacts to the business.

### **What will be done during this research study?**

You will be asked to engage in one 1:1 interview with the researcher, which will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted over video conference (Zoom or Microsoft Teams), in a location of your choice.

**How will my data be used?**

Data from our conversation will be analyzed using qualitative research techniques. Data will be analyzed to assign codes, reveal themes and categories, summarized, and then reported as a collection of the trends and strategies to influence meaning creation in change.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. Interviews will be scheduled at a convenient time and be conducted over video conference. To ensure your privacy and comfort, I recommend you use a personal email account and device for our interview and have access to a private, safe, and comfortable location where you are unlikely to be interrupted. You may request breaks at any time or withdraw your participation at any time, for any reason.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

You will assist in contributing to academic research on what strategies can influence meaning creation within change. However, you may not get any direct benefit from being in this research study.

**What are the alternatives to being in this research study?**

Instead of being in this research study, you can decide to not participate in the interviews.

**What will being in this research study cost you?**

There is no cost to you for participating in this research study.

**Will you be compensated for being in this research study?**

No compensation will be provided for participation in this study.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?**

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. All interview responses will be kept confidential, and only aggregated and non-identifiable data will be presented in this study or any future publication(s).

All digital recordings will be deleted once the transcript are verified and all notes associated with this study will be secured on a password-protected computer and handled according to Pepperdine University's Information Security Policies. Any potential loss of

confidentiality will be minimized by securing data in password-protected files on a password-protected computer. There will be no hard copies of the data.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the research team. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

All data and notes will be destroyed within five years.

**What are your rights as a research participant?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study-related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(310) 568-2305
- Email: [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu)

**What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

**Documentation of informed consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered, and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Participant Feedback Survey**

To meet Pepperdine University’s ongoing accreditation efforts and to meet the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP) standards, an online [feedback survey](#) is included.

**Participant Name** (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator Certification:**

My signature certifies that all elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgment, the participant possesses the capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent (Principal Investigator): \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Rebecca Escobar  
[rebecca.escobar@pepperdine.edu](mailto:rebecca.escobar@pepperdine.edu)

Graduate Student, M.S. Organization Development  
Pepperdine University | Graziadio Business School

**Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval**

**Pepperdine University**  
**24255 Pacific Coast Highway**  
**Malibu, CA 90263**  
**TEL: 310-506-4000**

### **NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH**

Date: April 12, 2023

Protocol Investigator Name: Rebecca Escobar

Protocol #: 23-02-2087

Project Title: strategies to influence meaning creation in change

School: Graziadio School of Business and Management

Dear Rebecca Escobar:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research