

When the “Social” disrupt the Sensemaking Process: Challenges of Hybrid Cultural Change within a Large Industrial Group

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Abstract

Building upon the extensive scholarship on organizational change from a processual perspective, as well as incorporating the theoretical insights from the field of organizational social movements, this article suggests that contemporary changes should be viewed as "hybrid" processes, combining both top-down and bottom-up approaches, in order to better understand their complexity. Drawing on the sensemaking process perspective, we focus on Thales Group culture change in the context of its digital transformation, based on a deliberate social movement-like strategy. We describe the double mechanisms and challenges of hybridization, and how social aspirations of the internal activist's community generated a *sensemaking drift*, affecting the purpose and process of change. The challenges and opportunities for implementing hybrid cultural change in multinational companies are also discussed.

Keywords: social movements, cultural change, organizational change, hybrid change, sensemaking.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, Van de Ven (2021) observed how research views on organizational change process have shifted from focused on planned episodic change to more unplanned continuous organizational changes. He sees this evolution as the result of dramatic changes in population demographics, technology, generational shifts, competitive survival, and social, economic, and environmental health and sustainability concerns. In particular, political and societal dimensions have penetrated the field of organization, giving birth to the concept of *intra-organizational social movement* and to a new field of research. However, the theoretical models of change developed for more than 50 years now are still unable to offer a proper “hybrid mode”, reconciling these two seemingly opposite views. Over the past decade, social movements and organizational literature have converged (Davis & Kim, 2021; Davis & Zald, 2005; Zald & Berger, 1978), to explain and describes organizational and civil society changes. In this vein, empirical literature has reported on the effects of societal claims put on organizations and the resulting CSR initiatives, bringing about emerging forms of change in organisation (Girschik, 2020; Skoglund & Böhm, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of contemporary forms of change processes and, in particular, the way they can be affected and crossed by societal concerns and

social movement dynamics. We suggest that contemporary changes should be view as "hybrid" processes, combining both top-down and bottom-up dynamics approaches in order to better understand their complexity. Mobilizing the sensemaking process perspective, this research explores the case of Thales Group's digital transformation, through its cultural dimension, to uncover the mechanisms of hybridization and the challenges they raise.

First, we will discuss the various theoretical models of changes developed in the field of organizational change and highlight the lack of theoretical reflexion about a possible recombination of top-down and bottom-up dynamics in a “hybrid” model. We then examine the significance and promising insights of literature that combines the fields of organizational and social movement studies to understand contemporary change. Our analysis will conclude with a theoretical perspective on "hybrid" change. Then, we mobilize the sensemaking theory, and outline its primary principles, as a relevant analytical framework to address our research question. After detailing our methodology, we will present the results of our case study and discuss a hybrid change theory.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. FROM PLANNED TO EMERGENT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: THE HYBRIDIZATION GAP

In a recent review article, Van de Ven (2021) observes how views have shifted from focused on planned episodic change to more unplanned continuous organizational changes. He sees this evolution as the result of dramatic changes in population demographics, technology, generational shifts, competitive survival, and social, economic, and environmental health and sustainability concerns. In particular, political and societal dimensions have penetrated the field of organization, giving birth to the concept of *intra-organizational social movement* and to a

new field of research (Davis & Kim, 2021; Davis & Zald, 2005; Zald & Berger, 1978). Hence, he predicts that future scholarship will focus more on unplanned continuous organizational changes, that emphasize experiential, emergent, bottom-up, pluralistic social movement following dialectical and evolutionary models of change. Although the planned-episodic and unplanned-continuous views of change may seem contradictory, Van de Ven invites us to consider them “entangled in one another,” offering a rich and nuanced understanding of the change process. However, he did not delve deeper into how these differing perspectives can be reconciled or intertwined.

Why is it that after so many years of maturing in a field as dynamic as organizational change, no theory is able to describe more precisely how these two types of dynamics can be reconciled? Looking back over more than 50 years of literature on the subject, dominated by the perspective of planned and top-down change, where are the lines of thought developing the notions of emergence, improvisation and bottom-up movement? What are the most promising ways of combining them with a planned vision?

Organizational change is a vast area of research. This research subject has been considered from many angles: origin and trigger factors, temporality, amplitude, dynamics and trajectory, factors promoting or inhibiting its deployment, the role of players, the environment, technology, etc. Different theoretical perspectives have been developed since Lewin's early theoretical model of unfreeze-change-and refreeze (1948). “The process of organizational change is an observed and/or experienced difference over time in some organizational characteristic, activity, or idea” (Van de Ven, 2021; Van De Ven & Poole, 1995).

Until the 1980s, Lewin's 3-Step model of change was dominant in the field, placing a strong emphasis on top-down communication and structured change processes, and assuming stability

as the standard background environment. His framework involves three stages: unfreeze (disrupt the equilibrium state of the group dynamics and create openness to change), change or transition (implementing the new norms), and refreeze (stabilization of the new behaviors, processes or structures). However, since then, the centrality of stability has been replaced by that of change as the new normal organizational activities background, and scholars have turned to more dynamic change theories highlighting bottom-up approaches and cultural shifts within organisations (Burnes, 2005; Rheinhardt & Gioia, 2021).

More specifically, research efforts over the last two decades have focused on two main areas: on the one hand, the aim is to describe the phenomenon of change, using increasingly complex, dynamic and process-based models (Gersick, 1991; Langley et al., 2013; Van De Ven & Poole, 1995; Weick & Quinn, 1999), on the other hand, a normative trend, has developed change management models, most often in the form of lists of steps to optimize the chances of success on the ground (Beer et al., 1990; Kanter, 1992; Kotter, 1995; Stouten et al., 2018).

Within the normative stream, models have largely been dominated by the planned vision. When an emergent or bottom-up dimension has been evoked, it has been in the form of concepts such as participation, involvement, the voice of employees, empowerment, etc. These designations imply the triggering of a positive bottom-up contribution to a broader, dominant top-down intentional effort. For example, Beer and colleagues (1990) state that “effective corporate renewal starts at the bottom, through informal efforts to solve business problems”. However, the initiatives they describe come from empirical cases where “top management was attempting to revitalize the corporation”, and they clearly underline the fundamental role played from the outset by top management in the emergence of the transformation in peripheral entities, and the importance of the managers of these entities in the local adoption of change. These emerging and participative dynamics therefore remain subordinate to a managerial intention. We can find

rare reflections about the tensions emerging from the combination of the two contrasting dynamics of change, evoking a “hybrid” form of change, in the three following works. (Sugarman, 2007) invites to consider a "hybrid" view, combining the two opposite views, planned and emergent, named “Drive” and “Growth” views. in the concept of “*bifocal formula*”, a hybrid mindset combining the (short-term) expectations of both the Drive and the (more long term) Grow views. This bifocal view allows the management team to overcome the potential reject by the *organizational immune system*, related to the old structures while they still exist. The second work is the famous Beer and Nohria (2009) E and O model, mirroring here again the traditional planned and emerging views, where E is more specifically depicted as a change strategy where shareholder value legitimacy dominates (translating into downsizing, restructuring...) and O is a “soft” change strategy, focusing on corporate culture and human learning capability. The authors suggest that successful organizational change often involves a combination of both models and highlights the paradoxes of their combinations, such as feeding employee distrust when such contrasting strategies are used alternatively. Finally, the right combination seems once again to remain “directed by the top and engage the people below”, which is not different from a classic participative management mode. The third work is brought by Strand and Jung (2005) who took a social movement perspective to describe a Total Quality Management initiative and conceptualized change as an “*orchestrated social movement*” initiated and shaped by the top but, where commitment is made possible through *personal experience* and *network influences*. As they pointed out, “in these contexts, a logic of mobilization replaces a logic of authority” (p.290), like in social movements. This approach brings us back to a form of participative management. While these works have revealed the challenges raised by the implementation of this hybrid vision of change, they seem to have neglected the social driving forces involved in the bottom-up dimension of these process, and/or

overlooked the potentialities of the social movement literature to address their specificities or missed/not yet raised the case where top and bottom objectives are conflicting.

We'll now take a closer look at the descriptive stream, which has paid more attention to emerging dynamics, and analyze how they have conceptualized and positioned them in relation to top-down dynamics. In their foundational article, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) identified a typology of four ideal types of change process models, each relying on a different generative mechanism (“motor”): teleological, lifecycle, dialectical, and evolutionary. These four motors are categorized based on two dimensions: (a) the unit of change, depending on whether the process occurs in a single organizational entity (life cycle, teleological) or in multiple entity (evolution, dialectic) and (b) the mode of change, describing whether the sequence of change events is prescribed a priori and regulated by a pre-established program (life cycle, evolution) or whether the sequence is constructed, and emerges as the process unfolds (dialectic, teleology). Combinations and interplay among the 4 models allow the description and explanation of many complex organizational changes. In this theory, the mode of change evokes a continuum between two poles: prescribed and emergent change, to define types of change, which makes these two types of dynamics theoretically incompatible, although the author invites us to combine them. The question of time has also played a central role in the development of theories of change, particularly with the rise of processual theories. (Langley et al., 2013; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Change was initially envisaged as a singular event, breaking with a stability considered to be the norm, as Lewin's model clearly illustrates. In contrast to this 'episodic' conception of change, (Orlikowski, 1996) observing the adoption of a new technological tool, conceptualized change as a situated practice, enacted through acts of improvisation, adaptation and continuous learning, in response to unexpected effects, in which learning plays an important role. Here, change is continuous, and its emergent

dimension accompanies planned change over time. This emergence is either an unexpected result of the planned change, or it offers responses to it, when the players must make sense of and solve problems generated by the constraints imposed by the new technology. The two movements are therefore totally interrelated, in a dynamic that nevertheless remains guided by a managerial intention (in this case, the adoption of a new technology). The concept of *punctuated equilibrium* introduced by Tushman and Romanelli (1985) and Gersik (1991) contrasts with this vision. As Gersick points out « fundamental change cannot be accomplished piecemeal, slowly, gradually, and comfortably.” (1991, p. 34). Punctuated equilibrium postulates that “Systems evolve through the alternation of periods of equilibrium, in which persistent underlying structures permit only incremental change, and periods of revolution, in which these underlying structures are fundamentally altered. Weick and Quinn (1999, p. 365) have formalized this distinction between episodic change, defined as “infrequent, discontinuous and intentional” and continuous change, defined as “ongoing, evolving and cumulative” (1999, p. 365). They describe the difference of perspective that applies when a change is studied at the macro or micro level respectively. Here, the episodic (and macro) change view considers change as intentional, dramatic, and driven externally for a short-term adaptation to a disequilibrium, and triggered by agents viewed as “change makers”. It is linear, progressive (meaning it leads to a desirable state) and goal seeking. Whereas the continuous (and micro) change view considers as an ongoing adaptation and redirection process, with emergent patterns of practices, guided by the meaning given by the change actors, seen as “sense makers” in situation, managing language, dialogue and identity. The intervention process theory is more one of « freeze – rebalance – refreeze » (p.379). This distinction has become a conceptual reference in the field. More recently, the influence of social media and new communication technologies in facilitating interconnectivity and collaboration among internal groups has been noted as a driver

of bottom-up organic changes within organizations (Kanitz & Gonzalez, 2021), helping to “smooth” the change management process

While these theories open the field to an emergent perspective on change, it is conceptualized and positioned as an alternative to episodic or planned change, and by definition the two visions are not combined. Even in its "continuous" version, where emergence is central (« change is ongoing mixture of reactive and proactive modifications, guided by purpose at hand » (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 379)), the "freeze - rebalance - refreeze" intervention process nevertheless involves managerial awareness of an imbalance, the intention to rebalance it, and the reinterpretation of the problem as an opportunity. Weick and Quinn compare the rebalancing action to a "logic of attraction", in which leaders play a key role. This logic is similar to the *sensegiving* process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), which we will develop later, triggered by top management and relayed by middle management, thus remaining the main driver of the sensemaking process (even if the "purpose at hand", referred to above, is that of a front-line employee), in a logic which remains top-down.

Yet must the emerging change always be a "reaction" to a global movement initiated by a managerial decision? Could it not be that an emerging change is guided by an intentionality of its own? Its own *raison d'être*? What if "change agents" were to take on a mission of their own and became "activists" with motivations other than those of the top management team? Here the literature on social movements can help us to consider this new type of change, and to design models that incorporate these emerging dynamics, and contributing to renew our theoretical vision of organizational change.

2.2. EMERGENCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

As we could see in the first part, emergent changes rely on the participation of employees and come from the bottom-up, highlighting the significance of grassroots involvement in organizational transformation (Van Der Voet et al., 2015). Joining this idea, Davis and Kim (2021) posit that research on grassroots social innovation and political action within organizations will be a particularly exciting area of inquiry.

The early work of Zald and Berger (1978) emphasized that formal organizations can be considered a type of polity where social movements can emerge. “Both organizations and social movements are forms of coordinated collective action and, therefore, ought to be conducive to similar forms of analysis” (Campbell, 2005, p. 41). Tarrow (1998, cited in Davis & Kim, 2021) defined a social movement as “sustained collective challenges against powerful opponents by people united by common purpose through underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames.” More generally, social movements can be defined as organized collective endeavors to solve social problems (Rao et al., 2000). Zald and his colleagues (1978) draw comparisons between the ousting of organizational leaders and *coups d'état*, the act of whistleblowing, and bureaucratic insurgencies. Since then, the convergence of organizational change and social movement literature has proven highly productive (Davis & Zald, 2005). Besides, organizational scholars have observed the growing permeability of organizations towards societal trends and political issues (Davis & Kim, 2021). For example, researchers have highlighted the importance of social movements as sources of cultural innovation and creators of new organizational forms (Rao et al., 2000). In this context, the concept of "employee activism" has garnered attention in organizational literature (Reyes, 2021; Robertson et al., 2023; Skoglund & Böhm, 2020), . A number of studies have already begun to explore this avenue of research, highlighting the roles and challenges *organizational activists* within organizations promoting social change (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; DeJordy et al., 2020;

Wickert & de Bakker, 2018), the role and nature of “*decaf resistance*” (Contu, 2008) the importance for these movements of *Employee Resources Group* (Welbourne et al., 2017), or uncover the potential *mission drift* deriving from the conflict between internal politics and external claims or mandates (Augustine, 2021). In the CSR field, internal activists believe in and identify with corporate responsibility and mobilize others to promote different ways of thinking about and doing business (Girschik, 2020). “Studying this type of activism requires an approach that moves away from the dichotomy between organizational resistance (the ‘inside’) and civil society activism (the ‘outside’). It demands an openness towards a heterogeneity of activism, not only demonstrations on the street, but also more mundane, everyday acts that can be seen as part of wider politics” (Skoglund & Böhm, 2020).

To encourage research development in this area, Davis and Kin propose a framework for organizational change from a social movement perspective, comprising four key questions.

The first question, ‘When?’ aims to evaluate the presence of *political opportunity structures* within the organizational context and explain the timing through which new ideas flourish. *Political opportunity structures*. can be defined as a set of formal and informal political or institutional conditions that encourage, discourage, channel, and otherwise affect movements activity and constrain the options available to activists (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 23)

The second question, ‘Why?’ pertains to the *framing* of potential changes or innovations (language and stories), the extent to which they are compatible with the existing culture, and the degree to which they are compelling to allies and decision-makers. *Frames* bring about the cultural dimensions of social movements. *Frames* are metaphors, symbols, and cognitive cues that cast issues in a particular light and suggest ways to respond to these issues. To succeed, activists must create a shared comprehension of the issues and solutions with their supporters

and potential allies. *Framing processes* are defined as “the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.”

The third question, ‘Who?’, inquires into the *social networks* involved in the process, connecting allies and decision makers, and tracking patterns of diffusion across this network. Networks are the vehicle through which new models, concepts, and practices diffuse and integrate an organization or movement’s repertoire, forming new material for framing and translation by bricoleurs. Besides, they help to forge a collective identity, supporting mobilization of members in front of a threat or opportunity. *Network cultivation* is the process through which mobilizing structures are altered, allowing movements to gather resources such as money, technical expertise, information, market access, in the present or on a long term (Gulati and Gargiulo 1999), or to forge new identities (Piore 1995).

The fourth question, "How?", addresses the *mobilizing structures*, that is, technological, social, and physical systems that can be used to mobilize action. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are examples of these structures in contemporary internal social movements. As the movement develops, insurgents have to create a more enduring organizational structure to sustain collective action. *Mobilizing structures* are “collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action” (McAdam et al., 1996). *Networks*, formal or informal, are particularly important mobilizing structures, connecting people among organizations or movements.

Strategic leadership comes into play as an important mechanism linking political opportunities, mobilizing structures, framing processes, and outcomes (Ganz 2000; Morris 2000). Their ability to cultivate several networks enhance their likelihood of meeting new ideas, expanding

their repertoire, providing resources for creative thinking, innovation and bricolage (Ganz, 2000).

We would like to conclude this literature review by a interesting reflection offering a first glimpse of what a hybridization between organisational change, social movements and sensemaking (which will form our theoretical lens) literatures might look like. Reinhardt and Gioia (2021) recently the concept of “*upside-down sensemaking*”, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the way social change can cross organizational boundaries and overturn traditional patterns of organizational change. They discuss how organizations can navigate change in a non-traditional manner, aligning with the evolving needs and expectations of the contemporary workforce. As they put it: “The characteristics of the new generation of employees (i.e., millennials who now fill the ranks of the lower echelons of their organizations), combined with the current rapid rate of technological innovation, facilitate the increasing ability of lower-level employees to influence what defines their organization in the future”. *Millenials* appropriate the *sensegiving* mechanism, and to some extent, disrupt and reverse the sensemaking process. “They have a different sense of desirable organizational objectives and actions than their predecessors (Ferri-Reed 2014; Myers and Sadaghiani 2010)—a difference that makes a difference in trying to manage change.”

The authors contend that individuals in lower positions will have a more significant impact on their organization's future change initiatives than their predecessors did, contributing to the phenomena of *upside-down sensemaking*. They propose that researchers and theorists should prioritize studying the lower levels of organizations in future research on organizational change to create more convincing models of future change dynamics. In this vein, *upside down sensemaking* concept is an interesting input for a reflection about social movement dynamics in contemporary organizational changes.

Drawing on organizational change literature learning and gaps, and on this promising framework inspired by social movement literature, we are able to consider a new kind of theoretical model of change: hybrid change.

2.3. TOWARD A HYBRID VIEW OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

By highlighting the growing emergence of bottom-up mechanisms within contemporary organizational change and recognizing the emergence of “social movement like” dynamics of change in organizations, this literature review invites to consider more attentively a "hybrid" form of change dynamics, combining both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms. However, if Van de Ven (2021) invites us to consider bottom-up and top-down change as complementary, and to develop our understanding of their interweaving, and if social movements constitute an inspiring literature for studying this bottom-up movement, a series of questions nevertheless emerge. A social movement is in essence not "commanded" from above, but forms spontaneously in response to the environment within which its members evolve (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Creed & Scully, 2000; Davis & Kim, 2021). If organizational social movements can be crossed or motivated by external influences of a societal nature, and/or triggered by internal activists, can they also be decided or guided by top management? The question of their interweaving poses several challenges from the outset: how do the two dynamics at work fit together? How do the motivations of top management fit in with the individual, collective and even societal motivations of employees?

In light of these developments, the objective of this article is to address the "hybridization gap" that arises from the convergence of the two fields discussed previously. Additionally, we aim to elucidate the complex and initially contradictory processes (top down, bottom-up and socially driven) that arise from this intersection. To achieve this goal, we pose the following

research question: « How do the social aspirations of workers voluntarily involved in a bottom-up movement affect/shape planned organizational change both in its objectives, scope and process? »

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SENSEMAKING PERSPECTIVE

To answer this research question, the sensemaking theory (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995) offers a powerful observation lens. Maitlis & Christianson (2014) offer a synthetic definition of the concept, since its first formulation by Weick in 1995: “a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn.” Weick defined in his seminal book seven properties (1995), summarized as follows by Helms and al. (2010) : sensemaking process is an *ongoing organizing process* (it never stops, but when an ambiguous event or an violation of our expectation occurs, we interrupt our flow of activities and we isolate cues to make sense of the situation), it is *retrospective* (action is taken and meaning is created afterwards, on the basis of the results obtained), *grounded in identity construction* (“who we are?” shape our understanding of the world), *focus on and by extracted cues* (we select and rule out cues according to our past experiences, training rules, norms... in order to support our interpretations of an event), *driven by plausibility, not accuracy* (we look for the most plausible match between the frames available to us and the cues perceived from the environment), *enactive of the environment* (like a self-fulfilling prophecy, our actions will change our environment in a way that contribute to make our assumptions more plausible), *social* (take place in interactions between individuals and is influence by our social environment, made of rules, routines, scripts, discourse, language) In subsequent research about sensemaking, scholars have enrich this initial framework highlighting and stressing the

importance and the role of the following three dimensions (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) : *power*, *emotion*, and *institutions*. Political structures of power implies that the dominant logic or frame (help by actors in upper levels of the hierarchy) will have a influence on the sensemaking across organizations, undermining the alternative frames, held by less powerful actors. Emotions can both affect negatively or positively the process, as sensemaking can trigger intense emotional reactions (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Institutional effects on sensemaking has been studied by several scholar but still have to be deepen, as institutional logics can lead organizational member to overlook important cues (Wicks, 2002). Also, the *centrality of identity construction* in the process of sensemaking has been growingly recognized and supported by empirical literature (Brown et al., 2015; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Helms Mills et al., 2010; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). When an individual enacts his environment, he tries to stabilize and preserve his identity.

The collective process of sensemaking enables the development of shared meaning within a team or organization. (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Organizational changes are typically prompted by and carried out through sensemaking processes (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The declaration of a change can lead to confusion and necessitates that organizational members understand and interpret new meanings, objectives, roles, routines, and modes of operation (Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Change is ultimately enacted through successful sensemaking, such that its meaning is effectively negotiated and agreed upon by members, at the different levels of the organization (Corley and Gioia 2004; Denis et al. 1996). Conversely, planned organizational transformation suffers when sensemaking efforts fail, signaling a lack of agreement or buy-in regarding what is being changed and/or how best to accomplish change efforts. Organizations and their members, therefore, implement actual changes through the process of making and giving sense about

those changes. Top management will have a strong impact on this process. Leaders both make sense of the environment to formulate strategic changes, and they influence the process of sensemaking of others through *sensegiving* “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sensegiving is not merely a top down process where leaders exert control over subordinates. Instead, those who receive *sensegiving* have their own interpretations and can actively resist efforts by leaders to drive strategic change. Furthermore, actors at any level of an organization, or outside its boundaries, may engage in *sensegiving* with others (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014)

Middle managers play also a crucial role in the process of shared meaning development, as they translate the initial vision of the top management to their team (Balogun et al., 2015; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). They mediate the the sensemaking of top managers and lower-level employees and contribute to change implementation(Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Sensemaking and sensegiving (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) are essential mechanisms to allow the change process to unfold. The way these two mechanisms are entangled can have an important impact on the development of the change process. Both are triggered and shaped respectively by the top management and change leaders for the first and by the employees at the bottom for the second, allowing the different levels of the organization to develop a collectively shared meaning of the new ideas, practices or processes adopted by the company.

Then, the sensemaking process represents an interesting multilevel lens to explore the way a culture change process can reconcile planned an emergent change mechanism, in a “hybrid” approach, through the different hierarchical levels of a company.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a longitudinal case study (Yin, 2008), and part of a collaborative research project conducted for the benefit of the Thales Group, which had the objective of assessing the impact of cultural transformation initiatives carried out since 2017 as part of the group's digital transformation. Collaborative research (Shani et al., 2007) is a particularly relevant methodology when it comes to study sensemaking and change processes, as this endeavor requires strong engagement with the actors (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Its participatory and longitudinal nature facilitates exploration of latent dynamics of organizational life (Argyris, 1993). Language and narratives are one of the main vehicle for meaning (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). Through successive interviews, respondents formulate their understanding of the ongoing change, the impact on their practices, and their own role in the process, offering a unique view of the sensemaking process. As such, collaborative research methods are recognized as offering exceptional access to and support of organizational sensemaking (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) and the device itself contribute to the co-construction of knowledge.

This article focuses on the diagnostic phase of the collaborative research. A large corpus of empirical data, whose collection has been facilitated by the internal posture of one of the two researchers, which is the Director of a team of consultants in Thales Consulting. Data collection took place from November 2022 to November 2023. It consisted of 36 interviews with 40 people (Table 1), internal documentation, participant and non-participant observations: at meetings, in a variety of formats, remote or face-to-face, and at various events in the form of plenary interventions or workshop facilitation. For instance, a workshop attended by 15 change agents (Culture Captains and Culture Coaches), was the occasion for a presentation on sensemaking theory and an exercise exploring their frames of thought relative to their main

interlocutors. From July 2023, the collective moments were occasions to present the results of the diagnosis, and to get reactions and feedback allowing to challenge and refine our own understanding and interpretations. Also, the two researchers took part in a plenary session at the Digital Festival, addressing the community of leading change agents (the Shakers): in 2023, they presented the approach of the present research, and in 2023, the main results of the diagnosis were presented, and were the subject of lively discussions during the workshops, the evening and the day that followed. Finally, letters were also collected from internal activists (members of the “Shakers community”) asking them to express the circumstances and motivations behind their joining the transformation movement, and the benefits they derive from it. These letters give a direct access to their personal narratives, as direct expression of the meanings they build in the process of change, allowing them to get involved. Throughout the research process, a common logbook was completed, recording observations, events, information and elements of reflection from both researchers.

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents

Respondants by Business Unit

GROUP LEVEL	Eng Group	6
	HR Group	3
	Digital Factory	2
BUSINESS UNITS	LAS	14
	TAS	7
	DMS	5
	DIS	2
	AVS	1

40

Respondants by corporate level of responsibility

TMT	5
Director	13
Manager	3
Project Manager	11
Engineer/Employee	6
Full Time Coach	2

40

Total interview time (h)

37

Respondants by country of activity

Global	9
France	24
Spain	4
Italy	1
Canada	1
Czech Republic	1

40

Various moments allowed us to ensure triangulation of data and perspectives: discussion with participants to vary interpretations about the same event, different forms of data collected (eg. interviews vs letters), different types of actors (managers and subordinates from the same unit for example). To have a deeper understanding of the ongoing dynamics among different types of actors, but sharing the same operational context, we performed two “deep dives” into two business units, labelled by top management as interesting examples of how to embrace the new digital culture. Moreover, the two researchers having different positions toward the field, the ongoing discussion about the case allowed us to confront their views, challenge their respective assumptions and build a shared understanding of what they were observing, mixing both theoretical and practical perspectives (Bartunek, 2008; Louis & Bartunek, 1992).

Our research process alternate phases of groundwork, intervention, reflection, and theory building, enriching one each other. For instance, sensemaking theory began to infuse our interventions when this pattern emerged from our observations, as both an explanatory and a resolute theoretical framework. The presentation of this concept to the field resonated with the actors and gradually became central to the researchers' interactions with the field. In this way, this interpretive lens gradually became an instrumental process of intervention (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), intended to enable participants to make sense of their experience of change and make explicit the multiple viewpoints surrounding the Group's cultural and digital transformation, in order to envisage levers for building shared meaning.

The analysis of the data was inductive, yet guided by the theoretical dimensions highlighted in the literature review, with a strong interpretative approach (Dumez, 2013). The rise in theory was carried out using the coding method inspired by grounded theory described by Gioia (2013). On the one hand, we sought to highlight characteristic mechanisms of a hybrid movement, that is combining top-down/planned and bottom-up/emergent mechanisms. On the

other hand, we sought to understand how these two opposed dynamics hybridized, to identify the conditions of hybridization, and finally highlight the challenges resulting from this process.

5. MAIN FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

5.1. PRESENTATION OF THE CASE

The Thales Group is a French multinational company that designs and manufactures systems, devices, and equipment in the fields of defense, aerospace, transportation, and security. Founded in 1968, Thales is partially owned by the French state (approximately 26%) and operates in more than 56 countries. In 2019 it had 80,000 employees and generated €18.4 billion in revenue, with 55% of its total sales from military work. Its organization is complex, traditionally very hierarchical, and its submission to numerous industrial standards has led it to develop a high degree of bureaucracy.

In 2017, in response to the digital transformation of the economy, Thales Group management launched a Digital Transformation (TD) program to adapt the Group to an increasingly disruptive market. This transformation program was based on three pillars: the creation of a Digital Factory (an autonomous entity, serving as a laboratory for new managerial and technological practices), acquisitions of digital companies, and seven transformation workstreams. One of these was to "Deploy digital culture and processes" throughout the Group to support the implementation of new ways of working in the perspective of creating new digital business models. The strategy for implementing this cultural change was based on an organic, bottom-up process, akin to a social movement. In particular, it aimed to deploy agile methods within the Engineering function, and was based on a "Digital Manifesto", expressing the values of the desired culture, inspired by the Agile Manifesto.

This research proposes to examine the deployment of this cultural transformation project, through the lens of sensemaking process, in order to better understand the different meaning to understand the meanings conveyed by the various stakeholder groups, through their different hierarchical levels, and to understand the effects of their understanding of cultural change on the deployment of the change itself.

5.2. THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: A PLANNED, SOCIAL MOVEMENT LIKE STRATEGIC CHANGE WITH MIXED RESULTS

Thales' digital transformation has all the ingredients of a planned change. Its cultural component is therefore part of this intentional, planned, top-down global approach.

In 2017, digital transformation was the subject of an ambitious transformation plan, triggered, inspired and driven by the Senior VP of Engineering, supported by the CEO of the Group. The objective is to answer to the dramatic changes altering the environment of the company : shift market, disruptive competition, new technologies (AI, drones, platforms, data mining, cyber security...). The plan was based on 3 main levers: acquisitions of digital companies and startups, the creation ex Nihilo of a Thales Digital Factory (TDF), as a model for experimenting new managerial practices, and a set of 7 transformation workstreams: 1/UX Design, 2/Culture and process, 3/Business Models, 4/Data, 5/Digital Workplace, 6/Technologies, 7/Cyber.

A sales pitch was developed to support the imperative nature of digital transformation (Figure 1). These elements of language can be found in internal documentation and in the speeches of the VP Engineering. The promise relates to competitiveness, but also to the attractiveness and retention of talent, a growing HR issue for the Group.

Figure 1 Rhetoric justifying the need for digital transformation.

Since the rise of the worldwide web in the mid-1990s, a whole new economy has emerged based on data valorization, digitization of customer interactions that improve user experience and new business models. This economy enables exponential growth and high profitability and relies on the capacity to innovate fast and create ecosystems of partners on a digital platform. The pure digital players have reshaped the economic landscape in the B2C environment and now start to challenge the B2B environment by applying the same principles. This offers a company like Thales great new business opportunities through new digital offers and the ability to reach operational excellence through new ways of working. These new ways of working will give employees a brand new experience, new processes and cultural shift and will allow Thales to attract and retain digital talents. Digital revolution in B2B and B2G could also lead to disrupt Thales businesses that will not adapt fast enough to this new environment. Combining Thales unique portfolio of equipment, its unique understanding of its current customers missions with digital players approach will make Thales a leader in the digital economy and the equivalent of the GAFAMS in all its businesses.

The cultural dimension is very present in the rhetoric of change. It is seen as both an objective and a means of achieving digital transformation. Both the Digital Factory (DF), launched in 2017, and the formulation of the Digital Manifesto, were foundational in the deployment of the "Digital Culture" Workstream. . In 2018, Clara was appointed as the Culture Leader. The Culture Workstream Board is composed of members of the engineering and HR functions. However, the workstream is equipped with minimal organizational infrastructure. Clara report to the VP of Engineering and doesn't possess any hierarchical influence over the VP of the other functional divisions or Global Business Units. The Digital Manifesto (DM) summarizes the principles and target values defined a priori by top management (VP Engineering). Inspired by the Agile Manifesto, it is built around 6 pillars: "Data over opinion", "Empowerment over

control", "Failure over not trying", "Test & Learn over plans", "Collaboration over protection", "Users over customers".

The strategy for culture change was decided to be based essentially on organic, bottom-up, based exclusively on the principle of voluntarism and natural dissemination: the intention was to create pressure from the ground to transform the higher levels of the organization. Clara, the transformation leader refers to the "ally theory": "don't spend too much time and energy with opponents, help those who ask for help". The precise mechanisms of this "contamination process", however, are not specified. A community of change activists, "the Culture Shakers" was launched and gradually developed. Several roles are defined. *Culture Leader*: Clara is the WS leader, responsible for ensuring that the ideological pillars of the manifesto are properly deployed, and for spreading agile practices throughout the group. *Culture Captains*: they receive specific training and become reference persons for the deployment of the culture in their teams. *Culture Coaches*: these are volunteer employees who are trained in coaching (often via a certified coaching diploma), and whose mission is to accompany the culture in the field by offering methodological support to volunteer teams. *Culture Shakers*: by default, any member of the community. *Culture Fans*: people who support the movement but are not officially part of the community.

Clara's initiatives still revolve around the principles of the Digital Manifesto, but take a variety of forms, drawing on inspirations, concepts and artifacts derived from the ideology of new forms of organization, plucked as she goes from fashionable managerial literature: the VUCA world, Great Place to Work, Lean Start-up, Teal Organisations, Liberated Company. The Tipping point, Tribal Leadership, Dream Manager, etc., whose reference works are distributed at events.

In 2023, the change device finally developed by the Culture workstream is rich and includes: content (training, sharing, bibliographical references, forums, etc.), a voluntary and motivated community of around 250 "Shakers", "Culture" events focusing on authenticity and conviviality, which bring to life the values, practices and experiments of the Digital Manifesto (GBU Events, site visits, Festival, Shakers Lab, etc.), a Shaker's Lab (intrapreneurial projects supporting cultural transformation) and the Thales Digital Factory.

As the change process unfolds, within the community, the Shakers Lab or at events, the workshops and initiatives proposed by the Shakers increasingly revolve around eclectic themes and inspiration that are sometimes far from the top management initial intentions: they readily mobilize personal development techniques and tools (e.g. Ikigai, Mindfulness, personal coaching, etc.) and extend to societal concepts such as CSR, the UN Goals, the theme of diversity (gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, etc.), feminism, etc.

At the same time, interviews with senior executives and others close actors also reveal a lack of support and shared vision about the expected culture change, within the group's top management team. They do not seem to be making it a priority, and have not set clear objectives for managers, who find themselves caught up in contradictory injunctions, having to decide between the short-term imperatives of "delivery" (financial and operational objectives) and a push for a transformation understood as optional. It doesn't take long for them to make this choice, as cultural and digital transformation are no match for the bottom line.

At the time of the diagnosis, the dissemination of the culture did not seem to have achieved its objectives, and the impact of the Shaker movement was limited. Its development was considered slow, and the different Business Units presented very disparate levels of

appropriation, with, however, some interesting local initiatives having appropriated the Digital Manifesto and certain elements of the system in their own way.

After presenting a comprehensive overview of the device and the outcomes of the digital and cultural transformation, the subsequent section will delve into an exploration of the sensemaking process that took place during the change.

5.3. THE EMERGENCE OF A COMMUNITY OF INTERNAL ACTIVISTS

The letters written by 19 “Shakers” and the analysis of their profile according to the entity to which they belong, their geographical region, their function and their hierarchical level, enabled us to draw up a typical portrait. A Shaker is mostly part of the Engineering Division, within Clara’s reach (Spain, the UK, France), and at intermediate or low hierarchical levels. He or she is curious and eager to learn new things and enthusiasts of management literature and personal development. He has often had a negative experience, even suffering, with traditional "command and control" management, and/or has been exposed to alternative methods, such as Lean or Agile. He is convinced of the possibility of humanist management serving both the performance of the organization and the well-being of its employees. He met Clara at a training course or event or was invited by a colleague to join the community. He considers his mission as a Shaker to promote change, break codes, transform the workplace for the better, and convince others to do the same. The result is a sense of belonging to a community that shares the same mindset and values and fights for the common good. This role enables them to extend their professional networks and to share common problems and interests. This community provide them with a source of inspiration and energy. The strength of their commitment is striking, and they are prepared to put in many extra hours to fulfil their role as Shakers, sometimes even against their manager's wishes.

We can understand the role of the shakers as a growing part of the professional identity of the Shakers. Their commitment to the community gives a new meaning to their work and through their work to their identity. Through the sensemaking process, they enact their direct environment and make sense of selected cues offered by the Digital transformation (the Digital Manifesto) and the cues offers by Clara, to build a plausible story, a desirable future, valuing collaboration, trust, learning, and well being at work.

5.4. THE DIGITAL MANIFESTO: AN AMBIGUOUS CUE

The Digital manifesto acts as a Totem. It embodies the values of the desired culture, around its six pillars: *Empowerment, Users, Test&Learn, Data, Collaboration, Failure*. However, actors' discourses show two ways of interpreting and integrating it into a discourse and a narrative, which will either focus on different pillars according to actors' identity preferences.

The shakers will unanimously support a “Social vision”, heavily emphasizing the Empowerment and Collaboration pilar. Conversely, managers and leaders will mobilize a language revolving around strategic issues, expressing a “Strategic View” and will stress the importance of data, users, and the importance to develop new business model to answer the disruption.

Hence, The Digital Manifesto represents a set of cues, from which each person can pick and choose as they see fit, in order to better adapt their understanding of change to their own challenges and personal identity? This is how, little by little, two visions of the Grou's cultural and digital transformation developed and coexisted, while still referring to the same totem pole: a "strategic view" and a "social view". A conversation will take place (the top managers' speeches during the Digital Festival, bringing together the Shakers) but without either party realizing that they are not telling the same story.

5.5. THE BIG ABSENTEE: THE MIDDLE MANAGER

Surprisingly, the transformative device, initially designed by the Senior VP of Engineering omits the involvement of middle managers in the change process altogether. This omission deprives the sensemaking process of its essential link, enabling bottom expectations to be aligned with top management requirements.

5.6. A SENSEMAKING DRIFT

At the end of this diagnosis, we could observe a "drift" in the purpose of the social movement. Initially created to disseminate a "Strategic view" of digital cultural transformation, the purpose of the change was reinterpreted by the Shakers and their leader, Clara, towards a "Social view", focusing on issues related to well-being and personal development.

Finally, the initial intention when the Digital Culture Transformation plan has been elaborated is represented in

Figure 1, whereas the obtained result, the “sensemaking drift” is represented in Figure 3.

Figure 2 Intended planned Digital Culture change

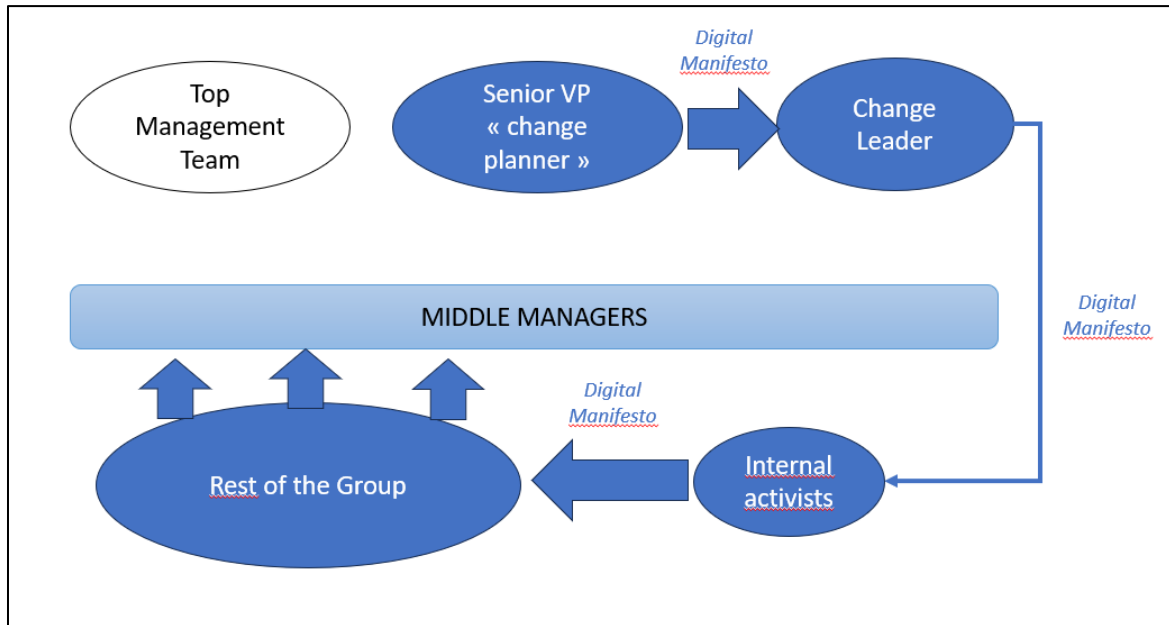
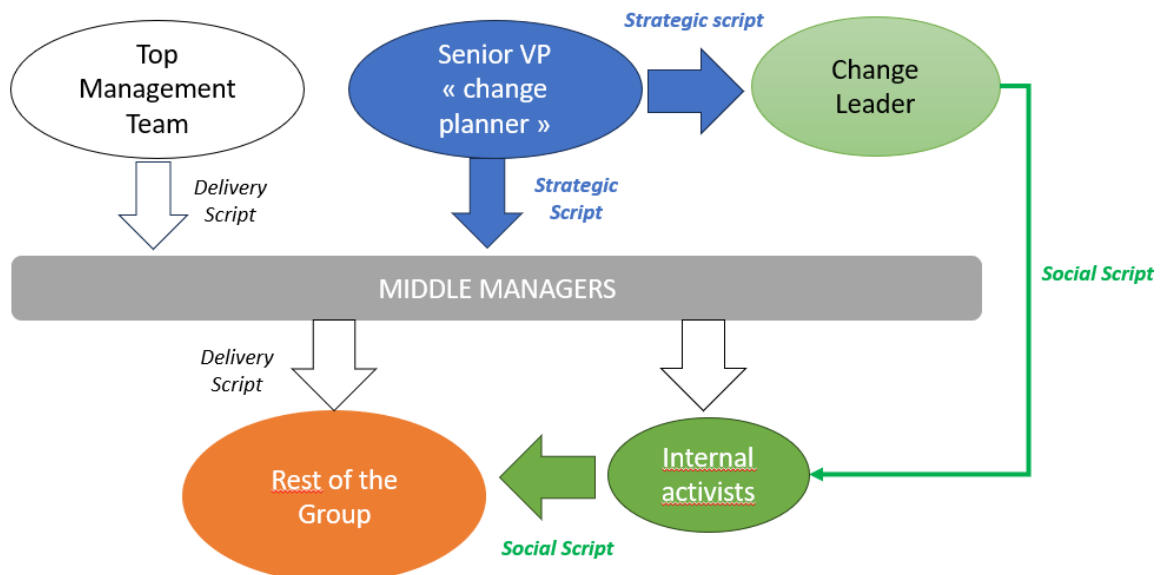


Figure 3 The sensemaking drift: Strategic vs Social scripts

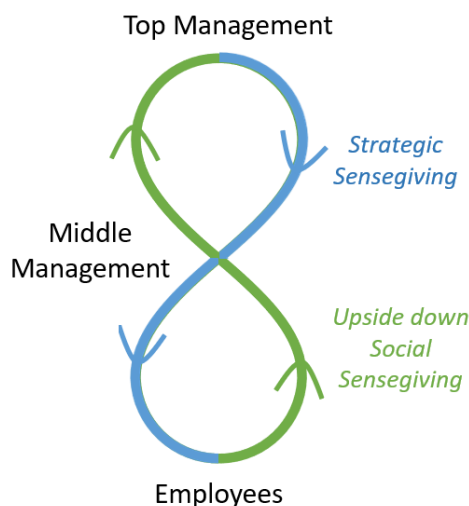


6. DISCUSSION: *SENSEMAKING DRIFT* AND HYBRIDIZATION

Our analysis of the meaning given by the players to the purpose of the cultural change enables us to show how the introduction of a societal dimension (in this case aimed at the personal development and well-being of employees) can lead to what we will call a *sensemaking drift*. In this case, the cultural dimension of the digital transformation, a planned change, although desired and triggered by top management with a “strategic” vision, was reinterpreted by those involved at the bottom, seizing the *political opportunity* opened by a *deliberate strategy of social movement*, to serve the social motivations of *internal activists*.

By describing the underlying mechanisms in this hybrid process, and the sources of failure in the multilevel sensemaking process in the observed case, we can reflect on the conditions of *hybridization* and, conversely, the risks of *de-hybridization* or *decoupling* of the change process.

Figure 4 Hybrid change sensemaking: Hybridization of Strategic Sensegiving and Upside down Social Sensegiving



As a conclusion we can suggest that the sensemaking process is a crucial conceptual key for a hybrid change theory:

- Strategic changes are triggered by *leaders sensegiving*: a strong vision of the needed changes allowing the organization to cope with its changing environment.
- Organizational social movements contribute to form an *upside down social sensegiving*.
- Middle Managers play a key role in hybridization mechanisms, as they allow to reconcile both kind of expectations strategic and social, in the *organizational sensemaking process*.

This case study aims to make a significant contribution to both the expanding body of literature on societal concerns within organizational contexts and the broader area of organizational change process studies. By integrating the disciplines of organizational social movements, organizational change processes, and sensemaking, the study provides a unique perspective on these key topics.

In conclusion, this research offers a rich and insightful exploration of a novel approach to organizational change, shedding light on the interplay between sensemaking, sensegiving, and the evolving dynamics of social concerns within the context of organizational change. This article is a valuable addition to the literature on organizational change and innovation, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in navigating change in contemporary organizations.

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