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Master Thesis

**Enabling Change? The Role of Leadership in Driving
Organizational Transformation – A Case Study.**

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MBA Performance Leadership

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Abstract

This thesis examines how leaders enable radical organizational change in a highly institutionalized field, drawing on institutional theory and differentiated leadership research. The research questions address how leaders enable change and how recipients' participation relates to their activation and responses. A qualitative case study of a public energy company undergoing organizational, strategic and technological transformation was conducted with data including 15 interviews, analyzed using Gioia methodology. Findings show that enabling change requires relational and directional leadership practices embedded in supportive organizational structures, and that empowerment is more effective than symbolic participation, advancing a multi-level understanding of leadership and organizational change.

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IV. List of Abbreviations

BEHG	Brennstoffemissionshandelsgesetz
BEW	Bundesförderung für effiziente Wärmenetze
CC	Change content
CEO	Chief executive officer
EU-ETS	European union Emissions Trading System
FK	Führungskraft
GEG	Gebäudeenergiegesetz
GF	Geschäftsführung
KWKG	Kraft-Wärme-Kopplungsgesetz
LSC	Leader shaping change
LP	Leader's perspective
MA	Mitarbeiterin
WPG	Wärmeplanungsgesetz

1 Introduction

Leadership, a process in which persons influence others to follow a purpose, is of great importance for organizational change (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Carton, 2022; Kotter, 2009; Oreg & Berson, 2019). An organization is a collective aiming for and following a common purpose (Carton, 2022) and organizational change is defined as its transition from one state to another (Lewin, 1951; Oreg & Berson, 2019). Change is not only characterized by its pace and scale, but also by its direction (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Radical organizational change is the shift from an existing to a different template, breaking with existing beliefs or norms (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). In highly institutionalized contexts, organizational change is often implemented through incremental adaptations of new practices (Scott, 1991) and is rarely radical, but more often gradual and can take several decades (Gegenhuber et al., 2022; Greenwood et al., 2002; Schupfer & Soppe, 2025).

Institutionalized field refers to organizations that operate under shared regulatory frameworks and normative expectations that shape what is perceived as legitimate and appropriate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Such fields are characterized by strong isomorphic pressures, meaning they tend to become similar to one another, and historically stabilized templates that constrain radical deviations (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996).

According to institutional theory, radical change requires dissatisfaction, value commitment and enabling power dynamics within the organization (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Leadership and management literature on the other hand emphasizes that leaders influence the outcome of change both through their behavior and strategic choices (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Transformational leadership, appealing to values to induce high performance, was introduced more than four decades ago, and has since become the most widely studied leadership construct (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Newer research streams show that relations-oriented behavior, including supporting, recognizing and empowering, has shown the strongest impact on managerial effectiveness and job satisfaction when compared to other behavioral dimensions (Yukl, 2012; Yukl et al., 2019). Building on this, more recent research emphasizes that change recipients are not passive receivers but actively shape change with their emotional and behavioral reactions, playing a key role in implementation success (Bourgoin et al., 2025; Oreg et al., 2018). Key functions of leaders' behaviors through which leaders shape recipients response to change are effective communication, being supportive and attentive to recipients' concerns and involving followers (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Participation, trust and

perceived control as well as self-efficacy increase activation and engagement, while low activation is associated with disengagement (Oreg et al., 2018).

However, most literature is focused on leadership styles such as transformational, charismatic, servant or empowering leadership. Recently, there has been a call for distinguishing between the intentions, displayed behavior, quality of execution and outcome of leadership action to prevent overlaps and construct redundancy between broad leadership style categories as well as causal indeterminacy between behavior and outcome (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Most of the research about leaders' impact on organizational change links leadership behavior to individual-level outcomes and leaders' strategic choices to organization-level outcomes (Oreg & Berson, 2019). What has not yet been addressed is the impact of leaders' strategic choices on the individual level – on change recipients. Leadership behavior and recipient response have been studied empirically, often through quantitative analysis in large companies (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Regarding change content and organizational setting, existing research places a strong emphasis on large-scale structural changes, mergers and acquisitions, deregulation or internationalization. Few studies examine the combination of organizational, strategic and technological changes within an institutionalized field.

The purpose of this master thesis is to analyze how leadership enables organizational change by examining the link between leaders and employees as change recipients, considering the organizational institutionalized context. The central research questions guiding the work are:

1. How do leaders enable radical organizational change in a highly institutionalized field?
2. How does the recipients' participation in organizational change relate to their activation levels, emotional reactions and behavioral responses?

I am addressing the research questions empirically by conducting a case study of a public energy company whose main business is district heating, that recently experienced structural changes due to a merger and is currently undergoing strategic, technological and digital change processes. In this case, organizational change is embedded within a highly institutionalized field of regulation, market constraints, political decisions and societal expectations.

Heat generation in Germany remains predominantly based on fossil fuels. While the share of renewable energy in electricity generation doubled from 27% in 2014 to approximately 55% in 2024, primarily due to the integration of wind and photovoltaic energy, the share of renewables in district heat generation increased only moderately, from 24% to 35% over the same time period (bdew, 2025; Umweltbundesamt, 2025). This shows that this industry still has major part

of transformation ahead and will undergo unprecedented defossilization in the next 20 years. To achieve the emission reduction targets set by the city and fulfill its public service mandate, the post-merger organization is expected to drive a deep transformation by transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. At the same time, this involves not only technological changes but also a substantial strategic shift along with organizational value reorientation from market-based, profit-driven logics to long-term ecological and societal value creation.

Drawing on leadership and change literature, as well as institutional theory, I use qualitative data to investigate how leaders enable change. This work does not categorize leadership into broad styles, but distinguishes between intended and displayed behavior, quality of execution and outcome of leadership as responses of change recipients, inspired by (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Changes that consist of a combination of merger and strategy shift along with technological defossilizing and highly ambitious growth in terms of infrastructure deployment in a medium-sized public company in Europe have rarely been studied. The multi-level and context-sensitive research design considering different hierarchy levels captures the dynamic and reciprocal relationships between leaders, change recipients and the organizational system (Oreg & Berson, 2019). A thematic coding approach informed by the Gioia methodology and inductive concept development was implemented, making use of 15 interviews and 16 electronic documents (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021; Locke et al., 2022).

The findings suggest that enabling radical change in a highly institutionalized field is a multi-level phenomenon. At the local team level, four leadership practices emerge: shaping relationships, holding direction, driving initiatives and empowering employees. Empowerment can increase activation of employees, but its impact depends on organization-wide decision-making architecture and clear strategic alignment. Beyond individual leaders, organizational practices like communication, participation, decision-making frameworks and the ways of structural collaboration across departments influence change.

This work links institutional theory with leadership research, by showing that radical change in this context depends on both relational and directional leadership practices. At the same time, leaders are bound to structural constraints; the effects of their work can be hindered or amplified by the processes and norms within the organization. Middle managers cannot compensate for strategic ambiguity at higher levels, as leadership as strategic and normative orientation from the top proves crucial.

2 Conceptual and theoretical foundations

This chapter provides an overview of relevant concepts addressing organizational change, leadership and change recipients. The current state of theoretical and empirical research is outlined and the research questions are derived.

2.1 Organizational change

Organizational change is the transition from one state to another of an organization, a collective aiming for and following a common purpose (Carton, 2022; Lewin, 1951; Oreg & Berson, 2019). Change can be characterized by its direction. The change process might be convergent, within an existing template in-use, or radical, breaking with existing beliefs or norms and moving to a different template (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Greenwood et al., 2002). The other characterizing features are pace and scale of change. An evolutionary change occurs slowly and gradually while a revolutionary change occurs swiftly within all parts of an organization (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). If a change process is characterized as radical or convergent, as evolutionary or revolutionary, is determined by intraorganizational dynamics (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Institutional theory explains how organizations tend to align with each other in terms of homogeneity in structure, culture and output through adaptation processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). According to institutionalism, organizations are embedded in institutional environments with similar market conditions, regulatory framework and societal expectations, affecting their structure and processes. This institutional perspective puts an emphasis on processes of coercive isomorphism and normative pressures that lead to similarities in organizing structure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and has been criticized for presenting organizations as passive and slow receivers of change (Ruef et al., 1998).

Within the institutional settings, organizations tend to change through incremental adaptations of new practices into their organizational systems (Scott, 1991). Radical change might have dramatic or even destructive consequences for the organizational framework in place while prevailing structures lose legitimacy and new norms emerge (Hinings, 1989). Many different scholars emphasize that organizational change in institutionalized field is rarely radical, but more often gradual (Gegenhuber et al., 2022; Greenwood et al., 2002; Schupfer & Soppe, 2025). In ‘Theorizing Change’, Greenwood et al. (2002) show how professional associations legitimate change in established organizational fields by identifying and framing problems as well as justifying solutions, giving both moral and functional legitimacy to new practices (theorization). Diffusion “occurs only if new ideas are compellingly presented as more appropriate than existing practices” (Greenwood et al., 2002, p. 60). The development of

accepted new norms can take several decades, especially if the prevailing institutional script is robust and stable (Greenwood et al., 2002). In ‘Greening from within’, Schupfer & Soppe, (2025) examine how fossil fuel incumbents attempt to legitimize sustainability-oriented innovation by shifting their organizational purpose from a profit-driven, shareholder-oriented model to one that emphasizes social and environmental responsibility. This shift represents a transformation that challenges historically grown organizational norms. They find that such shifts are rarely abrupt, but unfold incrementally, often affecting only parts of the organization and leading to conventional and green business models coexisting. Their call for future research is to explain the organizational tensions involved in that shift and how those struggles slow down the implementation of organizational change (Schupfer & Soppe, 2025). Gegenhuber et al. (2022) examine how digital transformation requires a rethinking of institutional processes. They think of digital transformation as a complex institutional change process that reconfigures organizational structures, professional roles, and field-level governance. Drawing from institutional theory, the authors emphasize that digital technologies reshape existing institutional logics, rather than functioning as neutral tools. Organizations undergo change as digital tools enable or constrain prevailing practices and logics. Change success depends on how well digital affordances are aligned with dominant logics and actor interests. Transformation might require re-negotiating of professional boundaries, leading both to resistance and innovation. Examples for these re-negotiations are established professions defending their ways, while new digital roles like data analysts strive for legitimacy. Digital platforms and infrastructures function as institutional actors, shaping rules and governance structures.

However, within the institutional framework, non-isomorphic and radical change is explained with dynamics within a specific organization (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Two important conditions for organizational change are interest dissatisfaction and pattern of value commitment (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). The extent to which groups are dissatisfied with the accommodation of their interests within the organization is a potential pressure for change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). This description is similar to Kotter's (2009) “sense of urgency”, that they specify as identifying and discussing crises or opportunities in their eight-steps model for organizational change (Kotter, 2009, p. 60). The direction of change is influenced by the pattern of value commitment within the organization, indicating the distribution of groups committed to the status quo or to alternatives. Organizations with higher structural differentiation tend to have greater conflict among the groups. Radical change occurs only if some or all groups are committed to an articulated alternative to the status quo (Greenwood &

Hinings, 1996). Kotter (2009) sees creating a vision and communicating the vision as a central prerequisite to successful transformation. Organizations that are strongly embedded and centrally located in the institutional field typically have a strong commitment to the status quo (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996).

While interest dissatisfaction and value commitment are prerequisites for (radical) change, power dependencies and capacity for action are the enablers for radical change. Since some groups within the organization have more power than others, they have greater ability to influence people to either enable or resist organizational change. If some groups within the organization are in favor of remaining in the status quo and some are convinced by an alternative, radical change only occurs when those in positions of privilege and power are in favor of the proposed alternative (enabling power dynamics) (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Kotter (2009) terms this as “forming a powerful guiding coalition [...], encouraging the group to work as a team” and “empowering others to act on the vision” (Kotter, 2009, p. 61). The ability to manage the transition process as the capacity for action requires understanding the envisioned future state and knowing how to navigate the transition process toward that state. Both the availability and the mobilization of skills within the organization are important (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Kotter's (2009) implementation-oriented model dedicates the following steps to this topic: planning for and achieving early successes that are visible and meaningful, building on progress already made to drive further changes and prevent regression and embedding new behaviors and processes into the organization's culture.

These findings raise the question of how change can be actively enabled within such institutionally constrained environments. While institutional theory emphasizes shared norms, power dependencies and question of legitimacy as central drivers of change, leadership literature highlights the role of individual, transformational leaders in initiating and guiding change processes. According to institutional theory and its conceptual models for change, institutions play an important role in framing and justifying change. Leadership has a role for mobilization but is very dependent on the position of influential power and institutions. Against the background of strong commitment to the status quo, power dependencies and prevailing institutional logics, the following research question is derived:

‘How do leaders enable radical organizational change in a highly institutionalized field?’

2.2 Leaders and change recipients

Leadership styles are constructed to examine the relation between leadership action with its outcomes and to distinguish between positive and negative leadership styles (Fischer & Sitkin,

2023). A leadership style is a pattern of behaviors and strategies a leader uses to influence and interact with their team and organization (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). More than four decades ago, transformational leadership was introduced as one specific leadership style (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) and has since then become the most widely studied leadership construct in management research, while also being the subject of considerable criticism (Antonakis et al., 2003; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Podsakoff et al., 1990; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Transformational leadership as introduced by (Bass & Avolio, 1994) is characterized by the dimensions “idealized influence”, “inspirational motivation”, “intellectual stimulation” and “individualized consideration” (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 112). Transformational leaders appeal to people’s values to induce high performance (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). It is opposed to both laissez-faire leadership and transactional leadership, the former concept being based on rules, structure, and performance-based rewards, operating within existing norms and structures (Antonakis et al., 2003; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Zaleznik, 1977). An alternative concept by (Podsakoff et al., 1990) presents six distinct behavioral dimensions of transformational leadership as follows: expressing a vision, supplying an appropriate model, promoting team goals, ambitious targets, and personalized support. Burke (1995) describes leadership as critical to change because the leader’s vision, behavior and communication style heavily influence change success. Besides transformational leadership, management and behavioral research has constructed other leadership styles, specifying them as positive or negative (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Examples for positive leadership styles besides transformational leadership are authentic, empowering, ethical, servant, charismatic and instrumental leadership. Abusive supervision and destructive leadership are two examples of negative leadership styles (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023).

Even if it would seem intuitive to rely on leadership style research results to identify which behavioral pattern is best to advance change process, this approach is insufficient. Over the past two decades, leadership style constructs have faced growing criticism from various scholars, a trend that has intensified in recent literature (Antonakis et al., 2003; Antonakis et al., 2010; Banks et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2016; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Fischer et al., 2021; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999). The criticism addresses how leadership styles are blending displayed leadership behaviors with underlying intentions, quality of execution and realized effects or outcome (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Leadership styles are conceived as single constructs that bundle multiple behaviors (Carton, 2022). However, they tend to group together behaviors that lack clear conceptual or theoretical coherence, resulting in amalgamated categories (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Meta-analyses have identified redundancy in leadership

constructs (Banks et al., 2016). Additionally, it is not clear if empirical findings for leadership styles are caused by leaders' behavior or if the relation between style and outcome has different reasons such as leaders attributes, organizational context or change recipients' attributes and behavior, leading to causal indeterminacy (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023).

Therefore, leadership behavioral research is crucial to take into consideration because it focuses on distinct behaviors and distinguishes between behavior and outcome, offering a deeper understanding of behavioral effectiveness. Relations-oriented behavior exerted the strongest influence on managerial effectiveness when compared with task-oriented and change-oriented behavior in an empirical study of 235 employees assessing their leader's behavior (Yukl, 2012; Yukl et al., 2019). Additionally, only relations-oriented behavior demonstrated a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction. The dimensions of relations-oriented behavior are supporting, developing, recognizing and empowering – in contrast to change-oriented behavior, consisting of advocating and envisioning change and stimulating innovation (Yukl, 2012). The key functions of leaders' behaviors through which leaders shape recipients response to change are “effective communication, being supportive, and involving recipients”, as Oreg & Berson (2019) find in their review of 94 papers and case studies on leadership and change (Oreg & Berson, 2019, p. 295).

However, even within specific behavioral constructs and displayed behavior, there is a range of effectiveness based on other factors such as the leader's personal attributes (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Sirén et al., 2016). Change-related leadership in general has been positively associated with firms' financial performance (Sirén et al., 2016). Yet, the role of the leader's personality and their attitude toward the organization and their work is very influential (Sirén et al., 2016). The positive effect of change-oriented leadership on corporate performance is amplified when CEOs exhibit harmonious passion, referring to willed, controllable job integration, seeing work as important but not all-consuming. Obsessive passion in change-oriented CEOs on the other hand – marked by a strong, uncontrollable urge to partake in work – does not yield any performance benefits (Sirén et al., 2016). That illustrates that even if there is a clear distinction between behavior and outcome, also leadership behavior constructs are not exempt from the critique by Fischer & Sitkin (2023), because they don't distinguish between leader's attributes, intentions, quality of execution and outcome. Consequently, issues such as limited generalizability and causal indeterminacy may also arise, if one overlooks these aspects. Here, it is critical to consider on the one hand the leaders' perspective to assess their sensemaking, attitudes, intentions and behavior. On the other hand, the change recipients' point of view is

important to evaluate the leaders' displayed behavior and quality of execution and their responses.

Leaders don't just influence nature, scope, and pace of change by their styles or behaviors. They also influence through strategic choices, setting organizational goals and procedures (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Strategic choices by leaders include administrative choices like ones concerning remuneration systems, and competitive choices associated with strategic planning, expenditure focus or diversification (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Strategic decisions about how to align an organization following a merger can predict the firm's success post-merger (Waldman & Javidan, 2009). Other examples are decisions about resource allocation. Putting emphasis on learning, communicating new agendas, and implementing targets are linked to successful change implementation (Oreg & Berson, 2019; Simons, 1994). Based on a comprehensive review of leadership and management research, Oreg & Berson (2019) develop a framework to link leadership behavior and leader's strategic choices to change outcome on individual and organizational level. They find that most of the research about leaders' strategic choices is linked to organizational-level outcomes such as firm performance and overall change effectiveness, whereas the majority of leadership behavior research is focused on predicting individual-level outcomes. The latter are responses by change recipients to organizational change like their emotions, change attitudes, behavioral consequences and sensemaking. The linkage between strategic choices and individual-level outcome remains understudied. Additionally, there are still open questions regarding the influence of the organizational context in which the effectiveness of leadership behavior is measured (Yukl et al., 2019).

Besides that, the roles of managerial levels and agency are relevant for change. Not only top executives, but also middle managers can assume roles in initiation and execution of change – and the role allocation influences employee support during organizational change (Heyden et al., 2017). While top executives provide strategic legitimacy and resources, middle managers contribute operational insight and employee proximity. Apparently, changes initiated by middle managers generate above-average support, while changes initiated by top executives do not increase employee support. The highest support for change is reached when middle managers initiate and top managers execute the change, despite this configuration being the least common (Heyden et al., 2017).

At the heart of every successful organizational change is its implementation by employees. In many cases of organizational change, employees are change recipients (Oreg et al., 2011). The perspective of change recipients is a newer stream of research, addressing the impact that

change has on its receiving end (Bartunek et al., 2006). While for a long period, academic attention was on leaders as change agents, during the past decade the experience of change recipients has received more awareness (Oreg et al., 2018). This literature analyzes recipients' experiences and psychological processes during changes (responses to change) as well as their job attitudes and personal outcomes (Oreg & Berson, 2019; Oreg et al., 2011). There is consensus that change recipients' reactions play a key role in determining change's success (Oreg et al., 2011). The explicit reactions are categorized in affective, cognitive and behavioral reactions (Oreg et al., 2011). Examples for cognitive reactions are intellectual sensemaking, satisfaction with decisions, support for the business strategy and perceived fairness among others. Behavioral reactions involve actions and intentions to resist or support the change or to cope with the consequences. Affective reactions are emotions such as stress, anxiety, pleasantness and satisfaction – they are characterized by two fundamental, independent dimensions valence (level of pleasantness) and activation (level of arousal), referring to the energy level associated with change (Oreg et al., 2018; Oreg et al., 2011). Low activation leads to deactivated emotions such as boredom or contentment, resulting in either change disengagement (despaired, sad, helpless – unpleasant, deactivated, negative valence) or change acceptance (calm, relaxed, content – deactivated and pleasant, positive valence) (Oreg et al., 2018). High activation leads to activated emotions such as anger or resentment. Consequently, change resistance (stressed, angry, upset – activated, unpleasant, negative valence) or change proactivity (excited, elated, enthusiastic – activated, positive valence) may result (Oreg et al., 2018). These affective reactions have various consequences as they determine the pace of change implementation (possible setbacks or smooth implementation), the feedback received during change process and the recipients attitudes and well-being (Oreg et al., 2018).

Relevant predictors of their reactions are personal attributes and characteristics of recipients, organizational and social context, the design of the change process and its implementation, the perceived benefits/harm and the content of change (Oreg et al., 2011).

Literature shows that participation in the change process leads to higher readiness and acceptance of change because it provides an opportunity to influence the change that is ultimately established and offers perception of control and self-efficacy, leading to higher activation and more positive evaluation of change (Oreg et al., 2018; Oreg et al., 2011). Organizational trust and the recipient's trust that their interests will be protected by the leader are crucial (Oreg et al., 2018). Personal involvement might decrease the change recipient's psychological distance from organizational change. Organizational identification and

involvement with their jobs as well as concreteness vs. hypotheticality of change (does it happen now or within next decades) lead to higher levels of activation (Oreg et al., 2018).

An even newer stream of research goes beyond the concept of change recipients as passive and receiving, considering that recipients may adapt, appropriate or reframe organizational change initiatives to serve their own ends (Bourgoin et al., 2025; Risi & Wickert, 2017). In general, literature assumes that the legitimacy of change projects is closely tied to the legitimacy of leaders as change agents. Legitimacy is defined as a judgement concerning the desirability or appropriateness of change (Bourgoin et al., 2025). Typically, leaders' positions of authority or expertise as well as their legitimation strategies such as framing and narrative are pivotal for change projects (Baba et al., 2021; Balogun et al., 2019). But the relevance of leaders as change agents for change projects is challenged by a recent study that shows how a change project gains legitimacy and support even as the leader's legitimacy decreases (Bourgoin et al., 2025). Change recipients assess leaders differently from their change initiatives, they take an active role in negotiating legitimacy and might appropriate their leader's change initiatives (Bourgoin et al., 2025; Suddaby et al., 2017). The crucial role of recipients in change processes is yet another reason to take into consideration their perspective. Against the background of increasing scholarly attention to recipients' emotional and behavioral responses during change, as well as the demonstrated relevance of participation for change acceptance and activation levels, the following research question is derived:

‘How does the recipients’ participation in organizational change relate to their activation levels, emotional reactions and behavioral responses?’

3 Methodology

The research design and methodological approach of this study are developed in close alignment with the research questions. This chapter captures the methodology of the study, starting with the research design (section 3.1) and the research context, where a brief overview of the case is presented to situate the study within its institutional context and highlight the key actors and structures involved (section 3.2). Collection of data and data analysis are then presented in section 3.3 and 3.4).

3.1 Research design

The overarching research questions guiding this thesis are:

1. How do leaders enable radical organizational change in a highly institutionalized field?
2. How does the recipients' participation in organizational change relate to their activation levels, emotional reactions and behavioral responses?

The aim of the study is to explore how established conceptual frameworks from institutional and leadership literature unfold in a real-life organizational context. Therefore, a qualitative case study is employed, granting an in-depth examination of a single organization across multiple hierarchical levels.

The literature review serves as an analytical foundation for the study. It informs the development of the interview guidelines and provides orientation for the subsequent data analysis. At the same time, the empirical research process remains open to emerging concepts and unexpected themes arising from the data (Gioia et al., 2013). In line with this approach, data is collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in an open and flexible interview setting that encourages participants to express their experiences in their own terms.

The organization was selected as a single case study based on three criteria: its exposure to high levels of change over several years and ongoing transformation processes, its embedding in a highly institutionalized business context, and its willingness to support the study by granting access to interview partners across hierarchical levels.

A qualitative research case design was chosen to capture the complexity of the organizational change processes. This approach can provide a detailed understanding of how individuals experience change and how they respond to it. At the same time, it complements existing quantitative research by remaining open to emerging concepts and themes that may not be anticipated in advance but become visible through qualitative inquiry.

When addressing the research questions of how leadership can enable radical organizational change in a highly institutionalized field and how participation of employees relates to their reactions regarding change, a multi-dimensional perspective is suitable. Accordingly, the study includes participants from different hierarchical levels and functional areas. This broad sampling strategy makes it possible to identify goal conflicts, organizational tensions and dynamics across the organization. In addition, this makes it possible to contrast leadership perspectives with those of change recipients.

To ensure credibility and rigor, the study applies several quality criteria for qualitative research, including triangulation with archival material, transparency in the coding process and member checks (Gioia et al., 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher maintained detailed notes documenting methodological decision and reflections at different stages of the research process.

3.2 Research context

The following case overview summarizes publicly available information to provide context for the organizational changes experienced by the company.

The research case is an energy company undergoing structural, strategic and technological changes. In recent years, this organization has undergone major structural changes. Previously, the company with fossil energy generation assets mainly based on coal-fired power plants was owned by a foreign stakeholder operating internationally, before being acquired by the public sector. Shortly afterwards, the company merged with another public energy utility whose business model was in renewable electricity generation and sales. As a result of these structural changes, the company grew significantly to more than 1.000 employees within four years after the merger.

Subsequently, strategic changes have been introduced, turning the previously mainly profit-driven international energy company into the most important municipal energy supplier. The mission statement of the organization shifted toward ensuring a reliable and secure local energy supply, driving the regional energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, while remaining competitive and operating for profit. The company has been required to expand its district heating infrastructure significantly, integrate renewable and climate-neutral heat sources, phase out all coal-fired power plants within less than a decade, and optimize existing systems for efficiency and resilience. These shifts demand substantial investments, for example regarding large-scale projects to substitute the existing coal power plants and to maintain and expand the grid infrastructure. Internally, they imply growing complexity in digitalization,

decision-making, coordination, interdepartmental collaboration, and workforce capability development.

Several examples of regulatory mechanisms illustrate how organizations within the energy sector operate in a highly regulated institutionalized field and legally regulated field. These include the gradual coal phase-out in Germany starting 2020 until latest 2038. In addition to national legislation, acts on federal state level are in place. In the context of this case study, coal exit is planned until latest 2030.

Other examples are direct regulatory law such as requirements regarding the share of carbon-reduced and carbon-neutral energy sources for district heating grid operators (Act for Heat Planning and Decarbonization of District Heating Grids, WPG) and specifications for using renewable energies for heating systems in buildings (German Building Energy Act, GEG) both effective since January 2024, as well as national subsidies for investing and operating heat utilities integrating renewable energy sources since 2022 (BEW, KWKG) and market-based instruments such as the establishment of increasing CO₂ taxes (on European level EU-ETS, on national level by the Act on National Certificate Trading for Fuel Emissions, BEHG).

At the same time, the political and institutional environment has become increasingly volatile. While institutional actors between 2019 and 2023 signaled strong support for ambitious decarbonization targets, the current setting is characterized by growing uncertainty and fragmentation. The end of the national ‘Ampel-Koalition’ and subsequent elections in 2025 have slowed key legislative processes and regulatory updates, creating a paradoxical situation for municipal utilities: Local stakeholders continue to demand ambitious progress toward decarbonization and infrastructure expansion, while political momentum at national and European levels has slowed down, and societal attitudes are becoming more ambivalent. In this context, a local referendum accelerated the target, setting climate neutrality for 2040 instead of the previously planned 2045. As awareness grows that the transformation toward a fossil-free energy system will not necessarily lead to lower costs, and that energy prices may never return to the low levels of the past, nationwide calls for stability, affordability, and for a slower, gradual energy transition are becoming more prominent. At the same time, public discontent is also fueled by the visible and disruptive impacts of infrastructure expansion at the very local level, such as construction sites and traffic congestion, all of which complicate the societal acceptance of the transformation process.

These developments set the stage for the subsequent analysis that builds on this overview, showing in detail how leaders drive the company’s transformation.

3.3 Data collection

Data was collected from two main sources over a period of approximately three months, combining semi-structured interviews and archival material (see TABLE 1).

The empirical core of the study consists of 15 problem-centered, semi-structured interviews conducted with employees at different hierarchical levels between end of September and end of November 2025. In addition, 16 electronic documents were collected, including annual reports from 2013 to 2024, media articles and shareholder reports.

TABLE 1.
Data sources and use

<i>Data source</i>	<i>Type of data</i>	<i>Use in the analysis</i>
Interviews	15 problem-centered, semi-structured interviews (131 pages of transcripts totaling 821 minutes of recorder interview) with employees at all levels between end September to end November 2025. The duration of interview ranges from 39 to 85 minutes, on average 55 minutes.	Interviews with personnel in non-managerial roles (change recipients) are used to investigate the displayed leader's behavior and the quality of execution, as well as the communicated and executed strategic choices, participation in change, and recipients' experiences and responses to change. Interviews with personnel in managerial positions are used to investigate their intentions, behavior and self-reflection about the quality of execution, as well as strategic choices. These interviews should investigate the leader's inner perspective about how they perceive their role in radical organizational change.
Archival data	16 electronic documents totaling 91 MB of data, namely annual reports of the companies between 2013-2024, media articles, published shareholder	Familiarize with the organizational setting, describe the case study (see 3.2), triangulate and integrate evidence derived from interviews.

<i>Data source</i>	<i>Type of data</i>	<i>Use in the analysis</i>
	reports (all data which is publicly available)	

Clear and transparent communication about the exclusive use of data for academic research as well as assurances of discretion and confidentiality were central to building trust when collecting data and to providing fairness in the process (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Pratt & Sala, 2021). All interviews were conducted in German at the interviewees' workplace, in sound-proof meeting rooms with closed doors. Precisely because the interviews took place at the workplace, it was very important to take measures to create a confidential atmosphere. Invitations and calendar entries were marked as private to prevent identification of participants.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher provided a short introduction to the research project and interview procedure. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw at any time, and that consent could be withdrawn after the interview. Audio recording was initiated only after renewed consent was given. These measures were intended to create a confidential and undisturbed interview setting.

TABLE 2.
Excerpt from the interview guidelines

<i>Persons with managerial position</i>	<i>Persons without managerial position</i>
<i>a. Organizational transformation</i>	
› What has changed since you joined the company? › What changes or transformation processes do you currently observe in the company? › What will be the most relevant changes in the coming years?	
<i>b. Own leadership role</i>	<i>b. Perception of one's own role</i>
› How do you view these changes? › How do you describe your current role in initiating and realizing change?	› How do you evaluate these changes? › To what extent do the changes affect your daily work routine?

<i>Persons with managerial position</i>	<i>Persons without managerial position</i>
› What role do you want? › To what extent can you influence change? › What are your intentions in initiating or implementing changes? › How exactly do you behave to initiate or implement changes?	› To what extent can you participate in shaping and influencing changes? › How do you feel about the changes? › To what extent do you feel active or passive regarding the changes?
<i>c. Leader's perception of their team</i>	<i>c. Perception of the team's leader</i>
› To what extent are the changes affecting your team and its daily work? › How can your team influence change? › What emotions and behaviors do you observe in your team regarding change projects? › To what extent do you perceive the team members as activated? › What feedback are you getting from your team or what responses are you observing in your team?	› How do you perceive the role and the tasks of the leader in initiating and implementing change? › To what extent can leaders influence change projects or decide about content and process of change? › How does your manager succeed in initiating and implementing changes? › What attitude, what behavior regarding change do you notice in your manager?
<i>d. Perception of the organization</i>	
› How would you describe the overall structure of the organization? › How do you describe the purpose of the organization? › Which roles or people have a major influence and what goals do they pursue? › What percentage of people desire change? › Is there a shared understanding of the organization's future? If so, what is it? › To what extent does the company possess the skills and willingness to change? › What is needed to mobilize these potentials?	

The interviews were conducted in a flexible and open manner. While interview guidelines provided orientation, question order and emphasis varied depending on the interview flow. The researcher practiced active listening techniques, interrupted as little as possible, and encouraged the interviewees to elaborate on experiences, reflections and memories. As a result, the interviews developed a natural and organic flow, often moving back and forth between topics. Interviewees accounted for an estimated 90 to 95 percent of the speaking time. Only at selected

moments did the researcher contribute reflections or experiences to stimulate further thought, occasionally resulting in short dialogical sequences.

Over the course of the interviews, core themes and central patterns began to recur. Newly emerging insights increasingly complemented existing findings rather than fundamentally changing the overall picture. Data collection was therefore continued until the main dimensions relevant to the research questions had been sufficiently captured and a theoretical saturation was reached.

After completion of the findings section, interview passages containing direct quotations were sent to the respective interviewees for approval and to review for accuracy and completeness. This member-checking process further enhanced trustworthiness and interpretive accuracy.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic coding approach informed by the Gioia methodology, emphasizing inductive concept development (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021; Locke et al., 2022). All interviews were listened again at reduced playback speed and transcribed manually in parallel. Transcripts were subsequently pseudonymized.

As an initial familiarization step, transcripts of the five most content-rich interviews were printed and manually annotated to identify thought-provoking, surprising or puzzling passages in relation to the research questions. All transcripts were then imported to MAXQDA for systematic coding.

First-order coding remained close to the interviewees' own wording and expressions (Gioia et al., 2013). At this stage, relevant passages were coded without assigning interpretative labels, allowing the data to stand for itself. Initially, approximately 850 text passages were coded (on average 57 codes per interview), with some passages double coded. Through iterative refinement and a stronger focus on analytically relevant puzzles, the number of coded passages was reduced to around 770.

In subsequent steps, similarities and differences across codes were examined, and categories were consolidated, labeled and described. Active categorization strategies were applied (Grodal et al., 2021), gradually moving from informant-centric terms to more abstract second-order themes. Throughout this process, particular attention was paid to concepts that did not fit into existing theoretical frameworks or appeared especially outstanding. The data arrays were regarded from the informants' terms as well as from a more abstract theoretical level, trying to find answers to the question 'What is going on here?' (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021).

To manage the volume of material and gain analytical orientation, broader overarching categories (aggregate dimensions) were developed and repeatedly adjusted, dissolved, merged, or further differentiated. Interim versions of the coding system were regularly exported from MAXQDA to document analytical progress. MAXQDA files can be shared upon request.

Data structuring and analysis involved multiple iterations of building, revising and reorganizing second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. Memos were written for the themes, documenting which codes were included, what core aspects characterized the theme and why it was analytically distinct. To capture the working process, a method log was used. Additionally, interim results of the coding structure were saved (see Appendix 8.1).

Once a theoretically meaningful and stable set of themes had been established, a data structure was developed. This visual representation links raw data to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, enabling a higher abstraction and facilitating the integration of empirical findings with existing theory.

The data structure presented in FIGURE 1 shows an overview of the four aggregate dimensions Leadership practices, Organizational practices, Leadership as organizational orientation and Reactions to change.

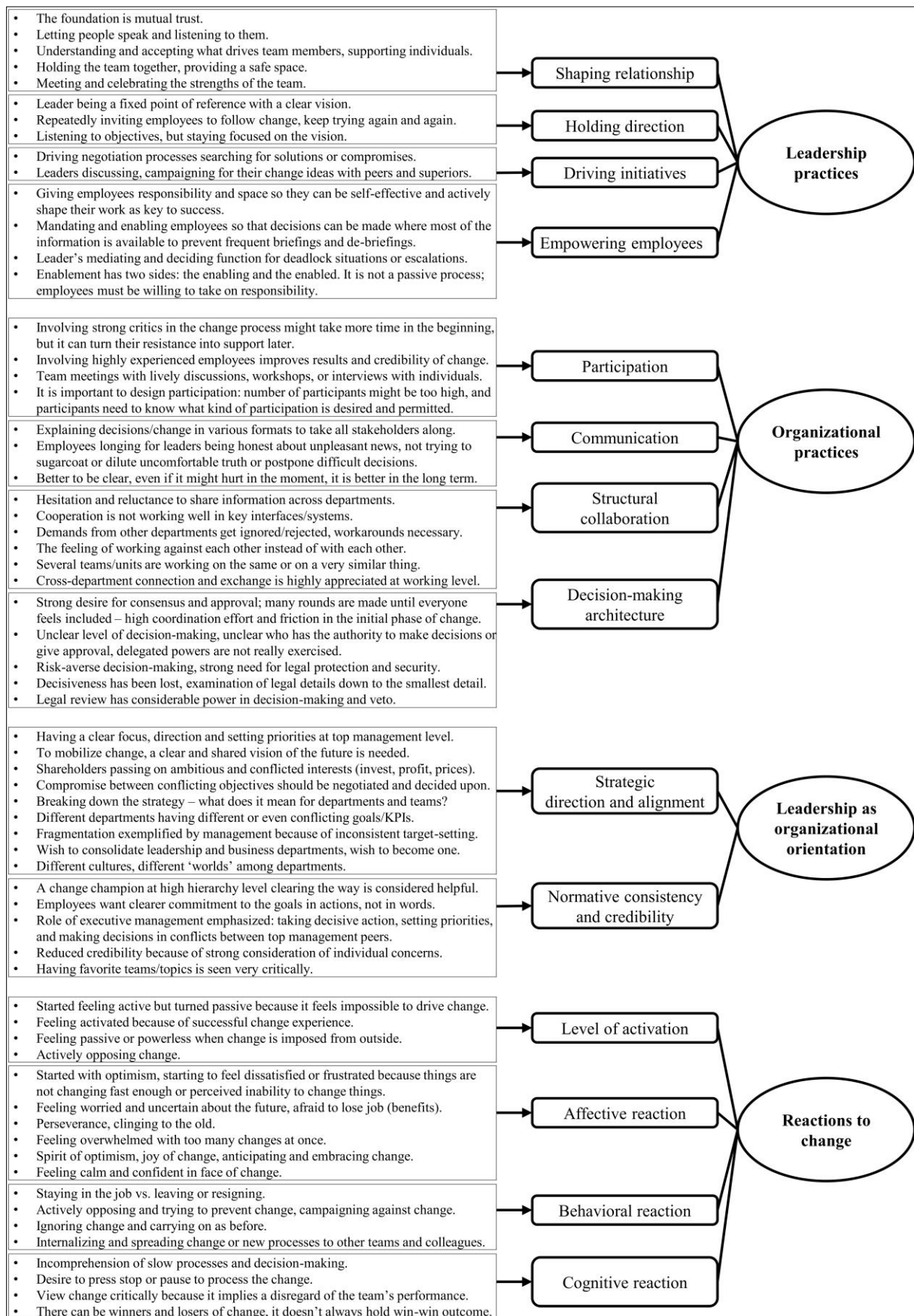
“Leadership practices” (see 4.1) can also be described as decentralized or local leadership behavior and attitude. This dimension captures what decentral leadership does to drive change, to make it conceivable and manageable for change recipients and team members. It shows how leaders enact change, translating it into their teams and compensating for organizational conditions. The four central themes within this dimension are shaping relationship, holding direction, driving initiatives and empowering employees. The aggregate dimension as well as second order themes are participant-centered and informed by the empirical data collected in the interviews.

“Organizational practices” (see 4.2) include how entire organizations act on formal and informal structures that enable or block change. This dimension refers to repeatable, often formalized or common patterns defining the conditions that enable change through decentralized leadership. Here, organization-wide practices are described that often are related to interdepartmental collaboration. The four central themes are participation, communication, structural collaboration and decision-making architecture. This dimension is also informed by empirical data collected in the interviews.

The aggregate dimension “Leadership as organizational orientation” (see 4.3) does not contain concrete leadership practices, but rather normative and strategic points of reference that guide the organization. It can therefore also be described as leadership as normative and strategic orientation. This dimension encompasses what leadership and change stand for within the organization, including direction, content and pace of intended change, definitions of acceptable behavior and the articulation of core values. Normative orientation emerges as non-delegable and appears to be primarily located at higher hierarchical levels. Central themes are “strategic direction and alignment” and “normative consistency and credibility”. This dimension and the aggregated themes are informed by the participants. During first iterations, the dimension was labeled “perception of leadership” (at high hierarchy levels). This dimension is needed because many participants, both with and without managerial function, express their perception of organizational leadership and strategy, as well as how top management represents and acts on the strategy.

The fourth aggregate dimension captures “Reactions to change”. It represents a central link for understanding how leadership and organizational change are interpreted at individual level. The dimension focuses on how change and leadership are perceived, emotionally processed and translated into action. It comprises four themes: levels of activation, affective (emotional) reactions, behavioral reactions and cognitive reactions in terms of sensemaking. This dimension is analytically needed to understand reactional effects. The themes are informed by theory, as (Oreg et al., 2018; Oreg et al., 2011) distinguish these categories of reactions.

FIGURE 1
Data structure overview (Source: own illustration)



4 Findings

The findings document various dimensions that shape how leaders and change recipients drive and experience organizational change. The collected data provides a detailed understanding of the mechanisms driving change in institutionalized environments (see chapters 4.1 to 4.4). These mechanisms are illustrated through interactions and experiences of leaders and change recipients, showing how they navigate organizational change.

4.1 Leadership practices

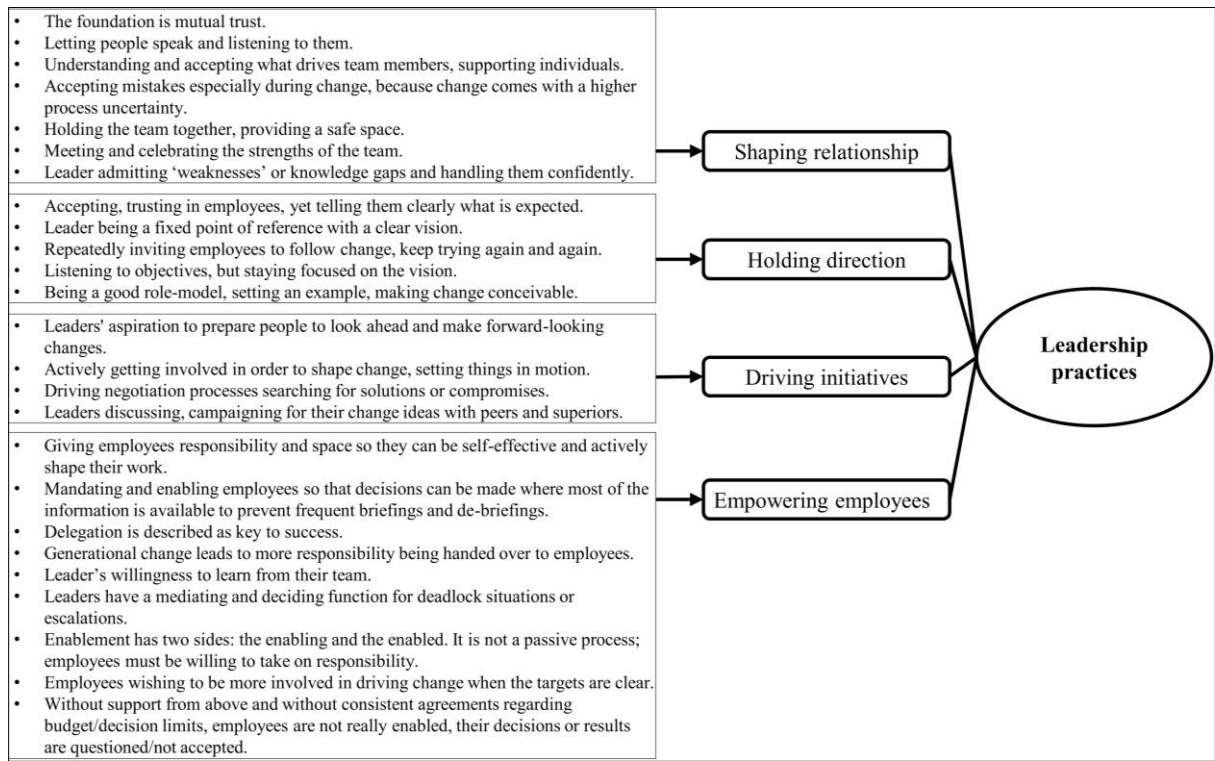
This dimension describes the phenomenon of how leaders practically manage and drive organizational changes towards their team. Both leaders and change recipients repeatedly report experiences concerning their direct interaction with each other, navigating change locally with their team. The four emerging themes described in the following sections are “Shaping relationship” and “Holding direction” as well as “Driving initiatives” and “Enabling employees”. They include patterns of behavior that leaders adopt to enable change as well as attitudes towards change and towards their team. All these practices are not solely carried out by leaders as people with a managerial role, but also by employees who take on active roles and lead change projects or initiatives. The detailed data structure of leadership practices is presented in FIGURE 2.

4.1.1 Shaping relationship

Leaders report that they have a genuine interest in their team members and their well-being. It is also reported that leaders aspire to get to know the individual team members and their motivations by listening and engaging in regular conversations. One person stated: “Well, I really talk to everyone and have a great relationship with all the employees. There's hardly anyone I'd rather not see.” Other leaders expressed: “I listened a lot at first to address people's concerns, needs and fears. To really understand what motivates others, so I can then clarify things in a conversation.” Another leader emphasizes the interpersonal dimension of leadership, stating: “[...] I am very fortunate that the people are really good at their jobs and I like them very much as people.” This also includes accepting individual differences: “People are just the way they are, I had to learn and accept that [...]”.

These statements express appreciation for the people behind the professional roles who make up the team. Relationship-building emerges as a relevant leadership practice in times of change. Leaders also report that they try to keep people motivated by taking individual preferences, strengths and talent into account when distributing tasks or roles.

FIGURE 2
Data structure of the dimension ‘Leadership practices’ (Source: Own illustration)



Many leaders emphasize their intention to “provide a lot of security and trust”, to “keep their team together and give them psychological safety”. In the context of change, this also includes setting an example of tolerating mistakes, acknowledging that change processes are accompanied by higher “process uncertainty”. Allowing room for errors is described as an important signal that experimentation and learning are accepted.

Trust within the team is repeatedly described as a stabilizing factor during change. It develops over time when people feel connected and experience one another as reliable. One leader describes how strong relationships help compensate for inconsistent, incomprehensible or externally imposed changes: “We meet regularly, we do a lot together in our free time, and we try to celebrate our team a little bit. That's what I do to counteract it. And it works quite well.” Across the interviews, being in “close contact and regular exchange” is seen as crucial for navigating ongoing change processes and for maintaining cohesion and motivation within teams.

Taken together, shaping relationships emerges as a central leadership practice, particularly in times of change or uncertainty, as it helps stabilize teams, foster trust and psychological safety and create a foundation on which change can be processed and sustained.

4.1.2 Holding direction

Leaders describe the ability and practice to combine understanding and empathy with clarity and expectation-setting. Successful, change-enabling leadership is characterized by “having confidence in what people do, but also clearly stating what they need” to implement change. Rather than avoiding resistance, leaders acknowledge concerns while maintaining a clear stance regarding goals and expectations.

Holding direction is further described as making change “change conceivable and exemplify change” by articulating clear goals and acting as a “fixed point of reference” in a dynamic environment. One leader explains this as “not to let yourself be swept along [by objections], but to say, I want to go here, I invite you all to come with me, and then there will definitely be those who are really up for it.” Another emphasizes the stabilizing effect of such clarity: “I can directly influence the satisfaction of the people around me by being clear about what I want, what I stand for, how I am perceived, and what I represent. And then that also gives people a sense of stability.”

Perseverance emerges as a central element of holding direction. Leaders report that it is necessary to endure phases of inertia, skepticism or open opposition, to “persevere through certain phases”, without changing course. Being persistent is emphasized many times. One interviewee stresses that it is “important to hang in there, to still bring up the topic for the fifth time. You will hear objections, but don’t necessarily let them argue you out of changing.” From the perspective of a change recipient, the consistent enactment of a clear vision is proven effective: “They kept asking about it, and it was clear that this was what they wanted. This was also communicated to the entire department. And in the end, it worked.”

The data suggests that holding direction is particularly effective when combined with relational trust. Where leaders succeed in building relationships while simultaneously demonstrating persistence, change recipients begin to perceive credibility and commitment, as one person states: “There have been initial signs of: You obviously mean it, and I trust you, and I also have hope that [...] things work out well.”

4.1.3 Driving initiatives

In contrast to “holding direction”, which is characterized by perseverance and the consistent enactment of a clear vision over time, the theme “driving initiatives” captures a more proactive and interventionist form of leadership. Here, leaders are described as actively pushing change forward by initiating discussions, campaigning for ideas and influencing decision-making

processes. This includes engaging “with division managers” as well as advocating for change topics among peers and superiors.

Driving initiatives is motivated by leaders’ desire to shape direction, content or pace of change in line with their normative convictions of how change should unfold. Another motivation is to lobby for the team’s interests when it comes to change to achieve fair change outcomes. One leader explains this as “a matter of making our point of view clear and also explaining the advantages that we as a company will gain from this.” This indicates that driving initiatives involves translating local or team-level perspectives into organization-wide arguments to legitimize change. Another leader states: “I’m fighting on many fronts, including in discussions with management. Sometimes I ask myself, don’t they see what’s happening out there [...]? I notice that a lot of people are saying they don’t want change, and everything will be fine until they retire.” This statement reflects both a sense of urgency and a perceived gap between decision-makers and operational level.

Several leaders emphasize a strong personal attitude toward action and initiative-taking. One states: “What are the issues that need to be addressed? I’m not very good at just sitting back and watching. When I see something, I feel that something must be done, and I find it very difficult not to act.” Another describes themselves as “very much a driving force who helps to get things started.” These accounts suggest that driving initiatives is closely linked to individual agency and a low tolerance for passivity in the face of perceived shortcomings.

At the same time, driving initiatives requires proactive action and confrontation with opponents. Many leaders see it as one of their most important roles to contribute actively to change and to “help move things forward”. Leaders should “look ahead and say, ‘what we have isn’t quite good enough yet’.”

Overall, the data suggests that “driving initiatives” represents a leadership practice in which leaders go beyond maintaining direction and instead actively create momentum in favor with their interests or convictions. By identifying issues, initiating debates and persistently advocating for change, they actively drive change and ensure that the organization doesn’t settle for the existing practices.

4.1.4 Empowering employees

The interviewees describe the phenomenon of empowering and being empowered as leaders handing responsibility to employees, giving them power to decide and drive change on their own. Empowering is reported to be relieving both for employees and for leaders. It is motivated

by the conviction that empowered employees contribute to better results through their expertise and proximity to information, and decisions should be made where most of the information is available, while at the same time giving leaders more time for other, more important activities. One leader states: “In our team meeting, I said: ‘Question everything, including me. My opinion is not the right one here, I am simply to blame and responsible because of my position, but that does not mean I have the best ideas’. [...] Because I actually want decisions to be made where most of the information is. And if they have to brief me – who has nothing to do with the project – from scratch, to decide, it’s incredibly inefficient. And my decision in that case is no better or worse.” It is also reported that teams have been effectively changing the status quo when leaders were willing to learn from employees.

The role of leaders is to encourage their team to take responsibility and to design the process with their teams. Empowerment is not a one-way process; it requires that employees accept responsibility and take an active role. As a leader expresses: “Empowerment means that employees are given more responsibility. But they also must take on more responsibility, which is a double-edged sword. Empowerment isn’t a passive verb. They have to accept it. And we are now in a discovery phase, trying to find out how much responsibility they are willing to take on and what is the optimum level for us.” Both empowering employees and acting as an empowered employee require routines that have not yet been practiced in all parts of the organization.

It is reported that clear communication of what is delegated and expected early on helps, as well as leaders qualifying employees, acting as mentors and being available for support. According to hierarchy, leaders also have a mediating role in blocked situations, for example if two peers are in conflict. It is important that leaders take on that role so that “employees know if they have serious problems, they can’t resolve themselves, they can talk to [their boss]”. Several leaders describe their role often as “resolving escalations”.

Instead of constantly motivating staff, leaders report it is much more effective to “clear the way for them” – then, employees can implement change all by themselves: “People who were passive for a long time are now suddenly proactively tackling a new topic. And [...] [the team members] came up with ideas that I hadn’t thought of before. An employee expresses their thoughts: “I would sometimes like to be more involved in shaping things if I had points of reference and knew which direction to take.” One leader reports that “very clear agreements with [their] boss” are necessary so that they can create a “framework” to empower their team members.

If support from above or organizational back-up is lacking, it prevents genuine empowerment which might lead to frustration. Another experience illustrates how an interviewee experiences nuances of empowerment: “Some decisions are made by employees up to a certain budget. Over this budget it's up to the boss, and if they say that it's beyond their authority, then it goes on and on. But every now and then, decisions that are below this amount are still questioned.” They add that “if you delegate tasks, you have to be able to deal with the result” and have a certain amount of confidence that it is correct. As a result, recommended action by ‘empowered employees is “questioned three levels above and they are asked to explain or repeat over again” which is perceived as “annoying, because it costs time and effort”. This shows a connection to decision-making architecture and to the level of decision-making (see 4.2.4). As an interviewee states, it is important “to ensure that the many great ideas don’t turn into frustration because people are not effective or their ideas are always met with resistance”.

These extracts show that empowering employees to participate in change is not an isolated process at local level. It is important that empowerment of employees is backed up by leaders and by the organization itself. The most important factors here are clear normative orientation (see ‘Leadership as organizational orientation’ in chapter 4.3) – especially how the strategic vision of change is translated into strategy and broken down to the divisions as well as functional decision-making within the organization.

4.2 Organizational practices

Furthermore, prevailing mechanisms within the organizations were brought up in the interviews. Emerging themes in the data are participation, communication and transparency, as well as processes of coordination, collaboration, and decision-making. These are referred to as intraorganizational dynamics or practices because they are described as established patterns in the entire organization that transcend local leadership practices. Thus, the themes participation, communication, structural collaboration and decision-making architecture are aggregated in the dimension “Organizational practices” (see detailed data structure in FIGURE 3).

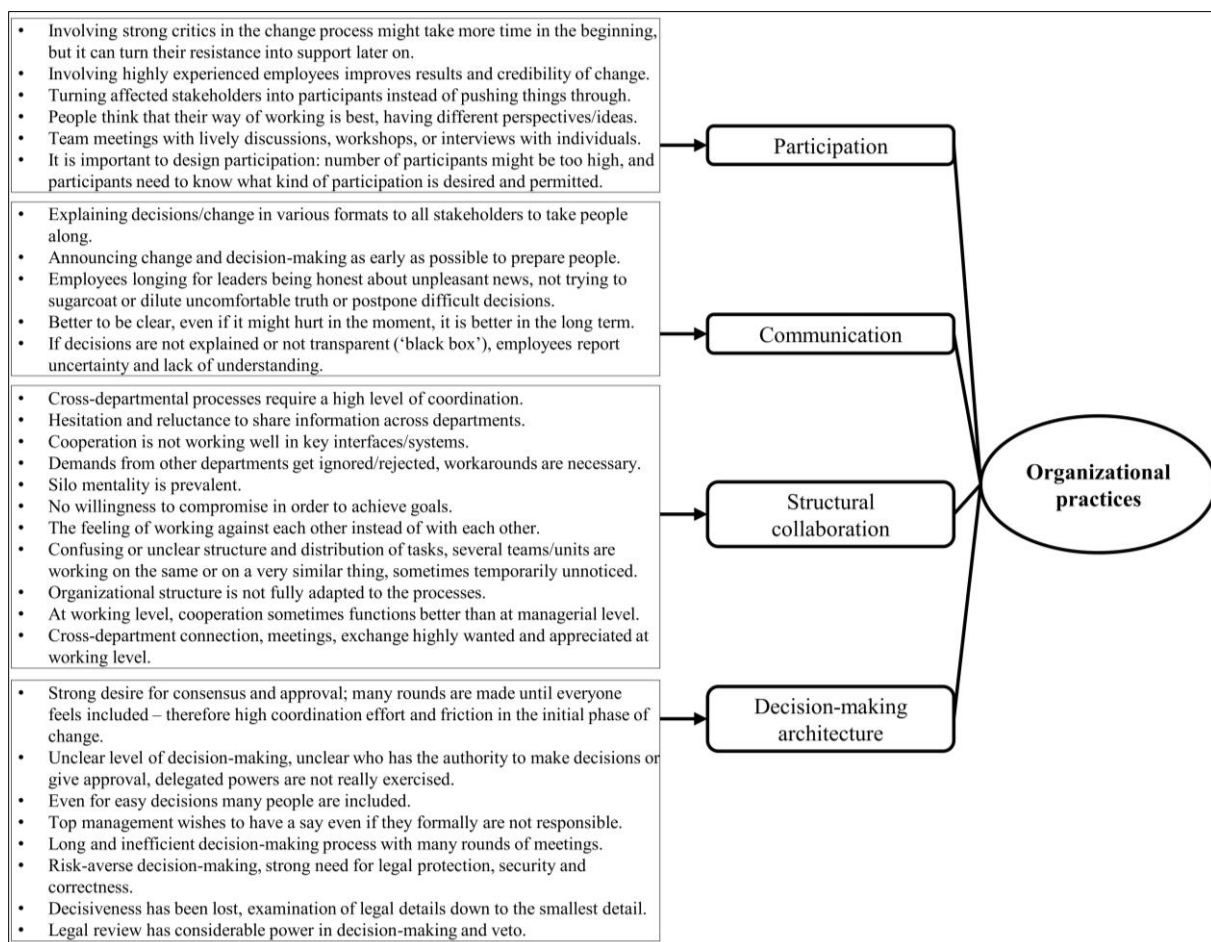
4.2.1 Participation

While the theme ‘empowering employees’ emerged because of the active process of leaders handing responsibility and power to employees, participation was brought up because many reported experiences revolving around employees or stakeholders getting involved and help shape change without taking full responsibility. Participation mainly reflects situations in which employees were invited to contribute ideas in structured formats or to directly get involved in change projects, while decisions and accountability largely remained elsewhere. If participation

is realized, it can reportedly turn “the strongest critic” of change into a supporter and active driver of change. It is reported that participation takes a lot of time but is sometimes the only way to win over opponents of change.

For effective participation, the scope for creativity and existing degrees of freedom must be clarified. If “people don’t know their role and don’t know what is allowed to express, they can not express their thoughts freely”, as a leader emphasizes. Several leaders underline that participation should only be organized if the results are considered and state: “Certain things are non-negotiable. Other things allow for creativity, where you can get involved, and that is also highly desirable.”

FIGURE 3
Data structure of the dimension ‘Organizational practices’ (Source: Own illustration)



Participation is an attitude and a practice which is lived within the organization to varying degrees. It works best if leaders really “want to involve their employees and allow them to speak their minds, listen to their suggestions, and not, let's say, just pretend to listen, then brush them off and somehow push through their own agenda”. The experiences have not always been positive: “It is very popular to make workshops. After 34 workshops, no one wants another

workshop. Maybe it is better to interview some selected persons in one-to-one meetings.” Others report that in the past, “issues that were raised [during participation formats] were completely ignored”. In other cases, participation provoked lively discussions that led to a variety of perspectives, new ideas and better results.

4.2.2 Communication

Many themes emerged around communicating change throughout the organization. Firstly, convincing and taking along stakeholders by communicating inspirational ideas was referred to as important: “You have to get people somehow” – and: “the communicated vision of change must have an ingenious aspect” to convince people. A person describes a former colleague and leader: “They were really a visionary. They were also good at communicating things. I miss them in their role of explaining and bringing positive things into our company.”

Regarding communication, the data shows positive experiences with transparent communication: “My immediate superiors always communicated honestly. They always came to us and told us what was coming. That was very good.”

A longing for higher transparency and for better explanation of decisions is prevalent: “Up to a certain level, everything is transparent, and then there's a level where it's just a black box.” Some actions or omissions whose motives are unknown lead to great uncertainty or surprises: “The problem is when people say they are reorganizing management structures. Then you don't hear anything about it for two years. And then at some point the next news is that the works council is up in arms, and the employees hear about it, which is bad.”

Several people express that they prefer honesty and wish that unpleasant messages are addressed clearly and as early as possible. It “is uncomfortable and it might hurt”, but is “needed so that people can process it and deal with it”. Another leader emphasizes: “It simply helps people. And while it may be unpleasant at the time, it is better in the long run.” Data shows that transparency is not always easy for mid-level leaders, because they too have only limited information at their disposal. An interviewee states: “I always gave people all the information [I knew about] [...]. I always communicated very transparently with everyone there. I also clearly disclosed all the negative things”. They “would have liked to be better informed, [...] so we could find out why this was actually being done. And none of that happened.”

4.2.3 Structural collaboration

Overarching and recurring themes revolving around collaboration between departments throughout the company are aggregated under structural collaboration.

Data shows that interface processes and coordination are not fully functional, especially at department interfaces. While some processes work well, especially processes with a lot of practice at “working level”, other processes are not smooth, and “departments don’t work well together, the structure doesn’t function properly in key interfaces”. In the interviews, dysfunctional interfaces are frequently linked to the merger process and to structures that are described as historically grown rather than deliberately redesigned. “There are some major problems coming from the merger. It was organized differently back then, and they never managed to smooth some things – a great deal can be described as ‘historically grown’.” Another person expresses that “the merger [...] wasn’t very bold because synergies were not really exploited. [...] If you merge two companies and then have the same number of managers before and after, then no meaningful merger was possible.” Some workflows require a lot of interdepartmental collaboration, leading to extra work because of the interfaces.

A recurrent pattern in the data concerns what interviewees describe as “duplicate structures”, where topics or tasks are replicated across different business areas within the company: “There are business areas that are structured as separate entities and thus perform functions that are already performed in other areas” or “We do a lot of things twice here. As a manager, if you don’t feel that the other person would do the job well, you prefer to do it yourself. At some point, each department starts to build its own biosphere [...]” Another emerging topic is isolation, unwillingness to disclose information or withholding information between departments, making it challenging to work with other business areas. One person states: “I have also experienced situations where data or internal processes were not disclosed”, others report that information is strategically withheld or that it is unauthorized to share information with other departments. Every business unit “has their own area of responsibility, [...] their own area of expertise and wants to protect and develop it, and everyone has their own interests, which is perfectly normal. So, it’s naturally difficult for management to find something suitable for everyone. This often leads to people doing several things in parallel, or to situations where one person does it this way, another does it that way, and there’s no communication at all. And in the end, you realize: We could have achieved something together.” A participant summarizes: “This creates a kind of competitive mindset within the company. There are sort of “kingdoms” within the company, where you can sense an old world versus a new world; that’s how it feels sometimes.”

Some describe the structures as confusing; many perceive a high structural complexity. Interviewees express a desire for better coordination and for dismantling duplicated structures, wishing to “know who to talk to when you have an issue, and that half the company isn’t

regularly dealing with the same topic and then wearing each other down over a single issue” because the situation leads to frustration. An example of working together efficiently shows that effective collaboration creates optimism: “It feels really good that [the other department] includes us in their meeting and asks for our opinion and experience.” Another interviewee describes how within one business area, the adoption and restructuring of teams led to noticeable improvements: “[After adopting the structure] they are now very effective, they experience each other at work, there are no barriers between them, [...] they ask each other questions, support each other [...] and simply make better progress in their work.” A clear desire is expressed by another interviewee: The needed appreciation “is not about [...] working hours, salary or anything else, but really about engaging with each other, ensuring clean processes for working together, so that five departments aren’t doing the same thing.”

4.2.4 Decision-making architecture

A theme that repeatedly arises in the data is high coordination effort that comes with decision making. The way that decisions are made is described as consensus-oriented and sometimes inefficient: “We like to agree on things before we change or approve anything”. And: “Someone must make the decision. But I have the impression that there is always another round, and another round, and another round. [...] And I have the feeling that everyone must be on board and satisfied before a decision can be made. And that's a very lengthy process when you first must gather everyone together. [...] Especially across departments. And I don't understand that, because if everyone has a goal and it's clear, why does everyone always have to be consulted on individual issues?”

It is reported that people want to be informed as early as possible and have a say in decision-making, even if they are only mildly affected or not affected at all: “We have to involve so many people; even for the simplest decisions, you start by consulting 20 people. [...] Because it's all too difficult, I get them on board one by one unofficially beforehand, and then afterwards I just have a big meeting where 18 out of 20 already know about it... but it makes it very time-consuming and complicated to get things done in change processes.” As a result, it is reported that change processes have higher friction and take longer in the beginning, while maybe in the long run the commitment is better. One interviewee describes how as a result, change processes are initiated and decided slowly or hesitantly: “In my experience, you can usually see results sooner than that. [...] There are always points of friction at the beginning. In other words I've seen, it was implemented and then there were points of friction. Once we have consensus here,

we can all get started. So basically, it's just postponed. You invest the same amount of time, but then you have peace and quiet while executing.”

Interviewees describe that decision-making often stalls because it remains unclear at which hierarchical level decisions are expected to be taken. This ambiguity regarding decision authority is experienced as a significant obstacle to change: “This is a huge obstacle to change processes because people don't feel empowered to make decisions, and perhaps it's also a bit convenient. And the problem is, the further up it is passed on, the less there is expertise or training on the subject, until only very generic decisions can be made or it is decided to pass it back down again. Which then leads to endless back and forth. Actually, at least a recommendation for action could be developed at the bottom, but even that is not done; it is simply not practiced.” Several interviewees perceive decision-making as being shifted to higher hierarchical levels. They report that issues which could be handled at working level are escalated upward, where proximity to the subject matter is limited: “At management level, it is not possible to delve into all issues in as much detail as at the working level... so there is simply a very wide gap between the division management and the working level.” Another interviewee summarizes this experience pointedly: “I always feel that decisions about some things are perhaps being made at too high a level.”

This misalignment between decision level and problem proximity is further increased by the high complexity of the issues and the limited time available at senior management level. Interviewees describe how this combination contributes to frustration and reinforces upward decision escalation: “The problem is that the issues are highly complex, and there is simply not enough time for senior or top management to deal with the problems in as much detail as would be necessary to do justice to their complexity. And I think that this then simply leads to frustration, which is a problem.” One interviewee describes how top management might become frustrated when decisions are “made elsewhere” without their involvement. The interviewee emphasizes that decisions taken locally – where responsibility lies, problems emerge and full information is available – should “not be a problem but instead be quite normal and healthy”.

However, if mistakes occur, the response “From now on, this always has to go through my desk” is still commonly observed. Consequently, the interviewee explains “the backlog on [...] [the manager's] desk keeps growing while employees lose understanding and respect because they want to do and decide things themselves and often know better.” In this context, delegating all decisions upward is described as neither effective nor appropriate.

Closely related to these decision-making bottlenecks, interviewees repeatedly point to a pronounced tendency toward risk aversion. Decisions are described as being delayed or avoided not only because of unclear authority, but also due to a lack of courage to make binding choices and an overemphasis on legal protection. As one interviewee puts it: “[...] we somehow don’t dare to make bold decisions. [...] And if it’s not practiced at the top, then it quickly trickles down to the management level.” Another emphasizes that meaningful change and organizational development require a higher tolerance for uncertainty, stating that “to grow, you have to be braver and take more risks”. This tendency toward risk aversion is further illustrated by an interviewee’s account of a contract review process. They describe a situation in which decision-making became increasingly paralyzed by the fear of overlooking potential risks: “Everyone has this fear: Oh God, what if I’ve overlooked something, and that was a bit demoralizing because you tried to argue objectively, and then something else came up.” According to this interview, the strong focus on avoiding individual liability led to a loss of strategic perspective, as “you lose sight of the big picture, what is actually the goal.” Notably, the perceived risk itself remained undefined, as “no one could answer the question of what risk they see if we leave it like this.” This example shows how risk aversion shifts attention away from collective goals toward individual risk avoidance, ultimately undermining decision clarity.

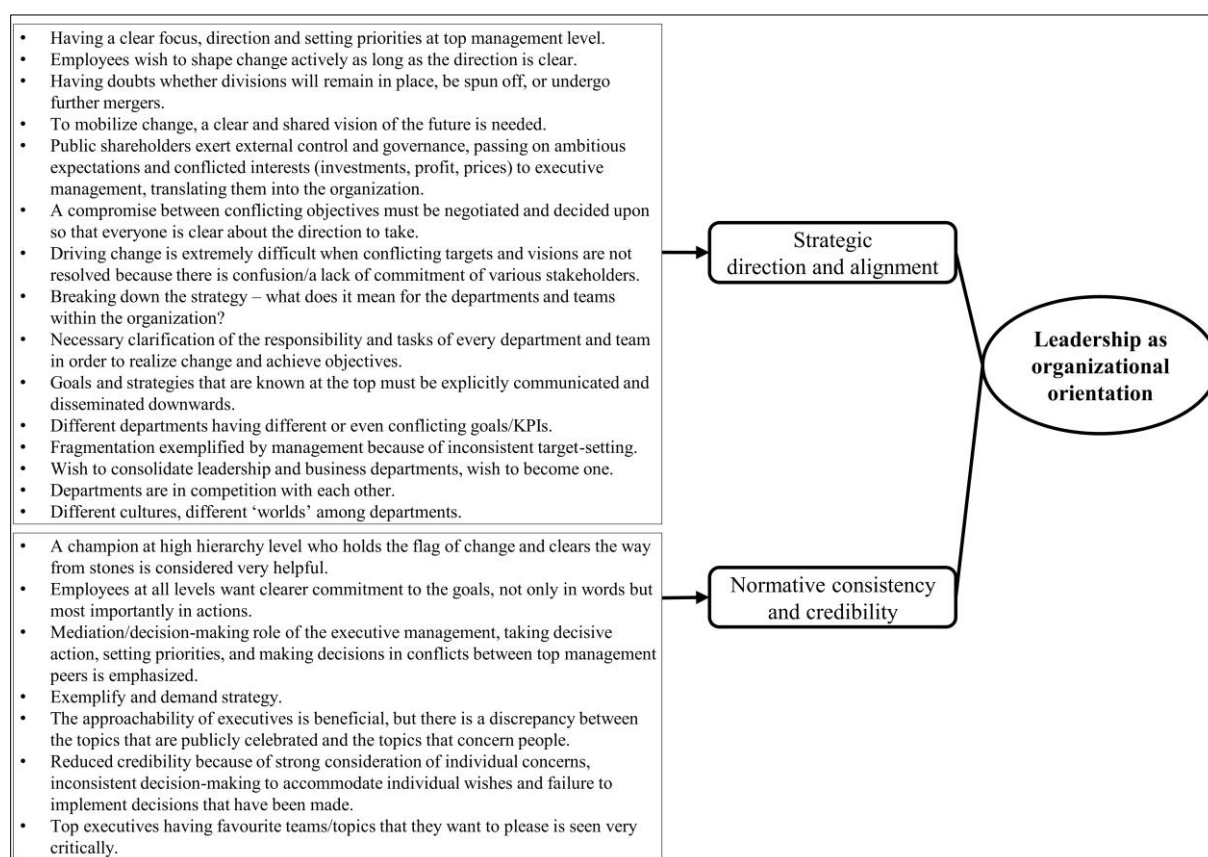
Several interviewees relate this risk-averse orientation to recent changes at top management level. One interviewee notes that the overarching framework has shifted toward a stronger emphasis on procedural security and legal certainty: “Now, the managing directors are more concerned with ensuring that [...] we are safe, that the management has certainty that everything is being done properly.” In this account, the previously received role of top management as a driving force for proactively pushing new issues forward and advocating them externally appears to have lost prominence. As the interviewee summarizes, “I don’t think that driving role, of pushing new issues forward and explaining them to authorities is the focus anymore.” Another interviewee echoes this assessment, describing a loss of pragmatic problem-solving in favor of increasingly formalized and legally scrutinized processes, accompanied by a noticeable decline in risk willingness. Interviewees further emphasize that risk-averse decision-making is reinforced by increasing legal and regulatory pressures from outside the organization, which substantially affect how work is organized and decisions are made: “But what is also extremely noticeable is that legal and regulatory issues are having an increasing influence from outside, there is a lot of momentum there. They have a major impact on the way we work, and we actually need to become more flexible to adapt to this new framework.”

4.3 Leadership as organizational orientation

This dimension captures leadership as a central source of organizational orientation in times of change. It aggregates leadership functions related to providing strategic direction, ensuring normative consistency, and mediating organizational tensions that emerge during transformation processes.

It comprises two interrelated themes. “Strategic direction and alignment” refer to the role of organizational leaders (often at the highest hierarchical levels) in articulating a clear orientation under change, defining who the organization is and who it is expected to become, setting priorities and translating overarching strategic intentions into concrete implications for departments and teams. “Normative consistency and credibility” focus on leadership behavior over time and addresses the perceived coherence between stated intentions, communicated values, and actual decisions. In the context of change, this theme captures how leaders incorporate, embody and legitimize transformation through consistent action and credibility.

FIGURE 4
Data structure of the dimension ‘Leadership as organizational orientation
(Source: Own illustration)



4.3.1 Strategic direction and alignment

Across the interviews, strategic direction and alignment emerge as central leadership functions in the context of change. Interviewees consistently emphasize that change process requires a clear sense of where the organization is heading, why change is necessary and how strategic priorities are translated across the organization. This lack of clarity is experienced as particularly challenging in a context characterized by multiple, simultaneous transformation processes. Several interviewees describe a perceived loss of strategic clarity compared to earlier phases of the organization's development. Reflecting on past experiences, one interviewee notes: „Before that, I felt [...] that there was a bit more of a strategic idea behind it.” In the current change context, however, strategic direction is often experienced as insufficiently articulated or unstable. Interviewees repeatedly emphasize that change requires explicit orientation, stating that successful transformation depends on “first, a clear goal and a plan, and then real commitment, genuine commitment from management”. A recurring theme concerns the mobilizing function of strategic clarity in times of change. Interviewees describe that uncertainty about goals makes it difficult to engage employees and to sustain momentum. As one interviewee accounts, to mobilize, it takes “a goal. A clear goal. Where do we want to go?” Others similarly call for “a clear statement” regarding the direction of change. Where such orientation is lacking, change is experienced as fragmented, reactive and difficult to navigate.

Data shows that strategic direction is strongly shaped by external political influence. Interviewees constantly emphasize the role of politics as the owner of the organization and as a key driver of strategic priorities. Political influence is described as “corset of political guidelines”, with many issues being “very much politically driven”. Several interviewees refer to “the controlling influence on our company from outside, by the owner” and to “external control by political leaders”. This influence is perceived to have intensified due to recent changes in top management. One interviewee explains: “There has been a significant change in the people at the top, the decision-makers. You can see that when the municipality appoints managing directors, [...] the basis on which they make their decisions is [...] ultimately politically motivated and controlled.”

Interviewees emphasize that political influence in the context of change does not remain abstract but has a direct and tangible impact throughout the organization. One interviewee states that “[...] Politics have a much more direct impact, affecting every employee in some way [...] with all the contradictions that arise as a result.” These contradictions become particularly visible in the form of conflicting change-related goals, such as the simultaneous expectation to

keep prices stable, achieve climate-neutrality, ensure growth, and maintain economic viability. One interviewee describes how delayed investments in the pre-merger period intensifies these tensions: “We now have to deal with the consequences of the later investments, which are then compressed into a shorter period of time – this affects our prices”. In this context, political expectations are experienced as amplifying pressure during change processes and as making coherent prioritization more difficult at the organizational level, especially if conflicted political goals are not addressed and clarified. These competing demands are described as “enormous, impossible to achieve, everyone knows that, but it’s still expected.” Interviewees emphasize that the absence of explicit prioritization makes it difficult to understand which goals should take precedence in change processes. As one interviewee states: “At some point, someone has to decide what the compromise between these conflicting goals looks like, [...] so that everyone knows where we need to go.” Several highlight that resolving these tensions requires coordination beyond the organizational level: “I would like to see this discussion on a global level with governing politicians and our shareholders, and also our executives.”

Data further shows that unclear strategic direction complicates change not only at the top level, but throughout the organization. One interviewee summarizes this challenge as follows: “It’s simply not clear where things should be headed, what we want, but now we must find solutions. This is challenging, and I see this issue not only within the department but also throughout the entire company.”

Beyond defining strategic direction, interviewees repeatedly emphasize the importance of translating change goals into concrete guidance for departments, teams and individual roles: “Management and department heads need to break this down and then demand it; it should not evaporate on its way from top to bottom.” This translation becomes visible in the practical questions employees ask during change processes: “So where exactly are we headed? And how? [...] What’s the plan for this year? And how can everyone contribute? [...] What does it mean for my team? What does it mean for my role?”

Leadership capability in translating strategy is therefore described as critical in times of change. One interviewee emphasizes: “Strategy is a crucial element of leadership because if leaders don’t know what the strategy is and how to break it down, they can’t motivate their employees accordingly or break down the goals appropriately.” Closely to this is the issue of prioritization. Interviewees describe that ongoing change processes create competing demands, making it necessary to clearly communicate what matters most at a given point in time. As one person

states: “Prioritization is also important, and that is the challenge, to tell employees what is important right now.”

A further recurring theme concerns fragmentation and misalignment between departments during change. Interviewees report that business units pursue change-related goals based on incompatible logic and metrics. One person refers to “this chaos of target KPIs in different business units, based on different criteria”, noting that one business unit is managed according to contracted power, while the other is managed according to the number of units. Conflicts of interest between departments further complicate alignment. As one interviewee explains: „The departments have their own tasks, and in some cases, there are conflicts of interest between them.” When some units feel responsible for contributing to change-related targets while others do not, collective progress is perceived as unlikely. Interviewees emphasize that resolving such conflicts is a core responsibility of top management. One respondent states: “Conflicts between business unit managers... well, only the top management can handle those. They must resolve them, that's clear. [...] It's clear that you can't enter a change process with an unresolved conflict. That's quite a challenge.” Top management is described as responsible and should “address this clearly, moderate it, and resolve such a conflict of interest, which can range from very simple solutions to personnel consequences.”

Several respondents describe a broader sense of fragmentation and mutual incomprehension between departments. As one interviewee notes: “There are many departments that view other departments with utter incomprehension. [...] there is astonishment at everything that happens here, and sometimes even a great deal of mistrust. You often hear people wondering why another department even exists, what they do all day. I think we'd be well advised to create a bit more shared understanding and coherence.” Another person describes: “I believe the major challenges in this company are that leadership needs to consolidate, meaning that there needs to be a shift away from mutually questioning what other business units are doing, and instead, a more coherent picture needs to emerge, along with a demonstrable commitment to shared goals and a common path forward. This is talked about a lot, but I think people are much more aware that it's not being practiced the way they would like. Therefore, it lacks authenticity.”

Interviewees articulate a strong desire for leadership that provides clear strategic direction and actively aligns priorities across the organization during change. One person summarizes this as follows: “We simply haven't found a shared culture or a common understanding of this company that everyone has. And I would like to see this actively addressed in the coming years.”

4.3.2 Normative consistency and credibility

Beyond providing strategic direction and alignment, interviewees repeatedly emphasize the importance of leadership being perceived as consistent, committed and trustworthy over time, particularly in the context of ongoing change. Several interviewees describe that ambivalence or hesitation at the top is quickly noticed and has a demobilizing effect during change processes. One interviewee explains that a leadership style characterized by tentative involvement, “I’ll just get involved a little, going to see what happens”, is particularly problematic at senior levels, as it signals uncertainty and a lack of commitment. When decision-makers themselves appear undecided, “everyone below isn’t committed either”. Role modeling emerges as a central aspect of credibility. The “management team has a great deal of influence [...] because how they present themselves and how they embody the values they preach. But I would say that applies to all managers – how they live by the values they represent serves as a role model.” Some interviewees describe leadership attitude towards change as “clinging to the past and clinging to the power structures they currently hold”, rather than actively enabling transformation.

In this context, leadership support is not described as hands-on involvement in operational details, but as an attitude and the willingness to take responsibility and to remove obstacles. One interviewee highlights the importance of leaders who are willing to intervene decisively when necessary. Support has to come “from above, at least to clear the way”. They describe a leader who may not personally drive the topic forward, but who is willing to say: “Okay, I’ll take care of it now, let’s do it.” Closely related to this is the repeated call for visible champions of change. Interviewees stress that successful change requires at least one “figurehead” who openly commits to the direction taken, communicates passion and persistence, and “holds the flag high” even when initial resistance or uncertainty arises. Perseverance is described as particularly important in the early phase of change, where symbolic leadership can help stabilize orientation.

Normative consistency is further discussed in relation to the alignment between stated strategic intention and actual decisions taken overtime. Interviewees describe deviations from declared goals or a lack of seriousness in pursuing them as highly problematic: “If there is a deviation [from strategical targets], or if it is no longer taken seriously within the company, then this is viewed very critically.” Similarly, inconsistencies between communicated intentions and concrete decisions undermine credibility: “Leadership, strategy and its implementation are not entirely consistent. This creates difficulties when, although it’s stated that something is desired,

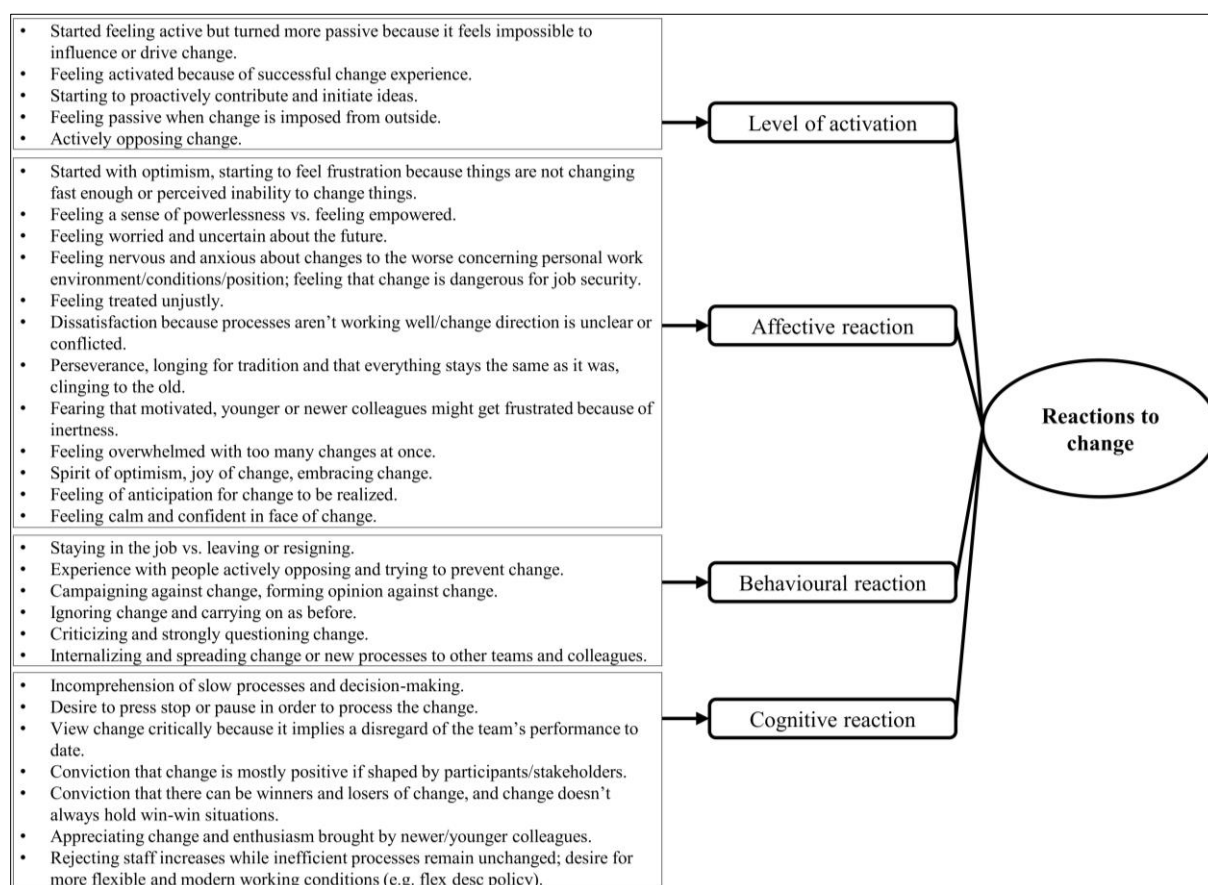
decisions are then made that go in a different direction” Another interviewee summarizes: “It’s not consistent in communication and implementation, [...] there is no clear line for me to see.”

Finally, several interviewees underline honesty and integrity as foundational elements of normative credibility during change. One interviewee stresses that such honesty must be explicitly desired and practiced by management: “I believe that this honesty is crucial, and it must be desired by the management. Starting with reports: can you present the figures as they’ve been calculated, or is it a case of applying a filter to make them look better? [...] Sometimes it’s about being less emotionally attached to things but [...] looking honestly and objectively at the portfolio and each division [...] trying to remain rational and neutral.”

4.4 Reactions to change

This dimension captures how employees and leaders respond to ongoing organizational changes in emotional, behavioral, cognitive and activation-related terms (see FIGURE 5).

FIGURE 5
Data structure of the dimension ‘Reactions to change’ (Source: Own illustration)



The data shows that reactions to change are highly heterogeneous and often ambivalent, ranging from enthusiasm and proactive engagement to uncertainty, frustration, resignation and active resistance. Reactions are not static but evolve over time and vary depending on individual

experiences, i.e. the extent to which change is experienced as internally shapeable or externally imposed. To structure these responses, four interrelated aspects are distinguished: “Levels of activation” (section 4.4.1), describing the extent to which individuals engage proactively, withdraw, or resist; “affective reactions” (4.4.2), capturing emotions associated with change; “behavioral reactions” (4.4.3), referring to observable actions such as adaptation, opposition, withdrawal or diffusion of change, and “cognitive reactions” (4.4.4), reflecting how interviewees interpret and make sense of change.

4.4.1 Levels of activation

Interviewees describe different levels of activation in response to change. Activation is closely linked to whether change is experienced as feasible, meaningful and influenceable.

Several interviewees report that successful change experiences can trigger increased activation. One describes how recent change created momentum: “And right now, just after we've made some changes that wouldn't have been possible six months ago, no one could have imagined then, this momentum is now emerging. [...] If we question things [...], then we can actually change them.” Others observe that “People who have been passive for a long time suddenly proactively tackle a new topic. And they say, ‘But we also need this...’ and then ideas come up that they hadn't even considered before.”

Activation is reinforced when effort is perceived as rewarding. Interviewees emphasize that seeing tangible results motivates further engagement: “This motivates them to continue contributing to certain areas and to invest further in process improvements. Firstly, they see that the time investment is worthwhile, because if the processes are better afterwards, then we all benefit. Secondly, they've seen that things can be changed that they previously felt couldn't be changed.”

In contrast, several interviewees describe declining activation when attempts to influence change repeatedly fail. Initial engagement may give way to “resignation”. Another reflects on their level of activation: “I think that has changed to some extent. I mean, I'd say it's been actively influenced. But that's also always led to a lot of frustration, so I'd slowly say it's been a combination of active and passive influences.”

A further pattern concerns passivity in response to externally imposed change: “So, what comes from the outside, [I feel] naturally passive about it.”

Finally, some interviewees describe active opposition, including deliberate attempts to mobilize resistance: “There were people who actively opposed it, [...] and even tried to find allies.”

Overall, activation levels are shown to be dynamic rather than fixed, strongly shaped by prior experiences of efficacy, perceived autonomy and the origin of change impulses.

4.4.2 Affective reactions

Affective or emotional reactions range from enthusiasm and confidence to fear, frustration and exhaustion. Many interviewees express a fundamentally positive orientation toward change, emphasizing curiosity and enjoyment, some are “embracing change”.

“I love change, and I am living change, too.”

“I think change is mostly positive. If you step up, you can be ahead of the curve and shape it. That’s interesting and exciting.”

Others anticipate that confidence may increase over time: “I am sure that many will look at it more calmly and with more confidence that they can shape change in a positive way”. Closely related is a sense of anticipation. Some interviewees describe excitement and even relief when change finally materializes: “Interest, excitement, many positive feelings.” Many would “perhaps even feel liberated when something changes”. One interviewee states: “One shouldn’t underestimate that there are quite a few people who find it too boring, processing the same forms for 30 years [...]. One shouldn’t assume there’s a lack of acceptance.”

However, some interviewees describe perseverance and attachment to tradition, with a desire for stability and continuity rather than ongoing change. A dominant emotional theme concerns feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of simultaneous changes: “The company now needs to gradually sort itself out. It hasn’t really settled down since the merger”. Another participant expresses: “We have many unfinished changes. [...] the textbook tends to think of a completed change process, and then you tackle the next one. But when they all overlap, it leads to massive uncertainty.” And: “It’s really difficult. We simply have too many issues to deal with.”

Concerns about personal consequences intensify emotional burden. Interviewees describe anxiety about deteriorating working conditions and job security: “Many people feel that change is dangerous and that their job might be insecure.” Worry and uncertainty are emotional responses. Interviewees note that uncertainty is stressful: “I think many people are a little scared now.” Other statements: “And living with this uncertainty is very difficult for many people.” And: “Change is simply frightening sometimes, [...] there’s no denying it.” Other statements: “There is uncertainty. Many people know how good their conditions are. Change isn’t always easy; it’s not always for the better. Change can also be for the worse.”

“You can already see that now, the concerns about whether certain positions will be eliminated.”

Emotional reactions are strongly shaped by how change processes are experienced in practice. Interviewees repeatedly link frustration not to change itself, but to dysfunctional processes, unclear or conflicting direction and perceived stagnation. Several describe an initial phase of optimism that gradually turns into dissatisfaction when change does not progress or appears impossible to influence. While some report growing confidence and self-efficacy: “There is now more self-efficacy and more of an idea that we can master this change somehow”, others describe a sense of powerlessness. Feelings of powerlessness emerge when initiative is met with repeated rejection: “Because you’re not making any progress and it’s always a struggle. When you have an idea and you’re supposed to implement it, and the only answer is always ‘no’. A constant ‘no’, then it eventually gets exhausting.” Over time, this experience leads to a feeling of exhaustion and disengagement: “Many say they’ve become desensitized over time. They’ve raised their hands so many times, saying there is something to change. So, it’s about inspiring that motivation again, because in general, it’s there.”

“And it’s difficult, hard to grasp. And when you experience that a few times, [...] you get kind of exhausted because you feel more preoccupied with internal processes and coordination than with the actual issues, and I feel that’s increasing.”

Frustration is often attributed not to resistance toward change itself, but to how change is managed and decided: “Of course, there are sometimes moments of frustration, but I don’t think it has to do with change itself, but rather with internal processes or decision-making; however, this is not yet resignation.” This perceived mismatch between motivation and organizational responsiveness contributes to dissatisfaction and a sense that “things aren’t running smoothly.” From a leadership perspective, this dynamic is explicitly recognized as a responsibility to be addressed by leaders: “And that is our task: to ensure that the many good ideas do not turn into frustration because people are ineffective.”

Finally, interviewees express concern that motivated, younger or newer colleagues may become frustrated by inertia: “And I often get the feeling that people lose a bit of [...] commitment and motivation, I would definitely say that. When certain things just aren’t right. It’s affecting people emotionally.” Another interviewee describes: “It’s frustrating for young people who really want to change something [...] Some are working hard, while others just sit back and relax.” One person adds: “So far, we do not yet see any willingness to withdraw among colleagues who have been with the company for a longer time and are unsatisfied. Personally,

however, I expect a completely different level of willingness to move to external positions among younger colleagues and those who have only been with our company for a few years.”

4.4.3 Behavioral reactions

Behavioral reactions to change describe how employees translate their perceptions, emotions and levels of activation into concrete actions within the organization. Interviewees report a wide spectrum of responses, from active engagement to withdrawal, opposition and exit.

One tangible consequence is leaving the organization. An interviewee recalls: “I saw very few people who said it went well. There was no onboarding process; many left because they were dissatisfied. I don’t think that change has been entirely successful.” Another person states: “If it becomes unbearable, you can always quit. But we never see that.”

Others describe active resistance, including organized opposition: They joined forces and said, “We’ll actively prevent this.” That was almost sabotage [...]. It was anti-change in the truest sense. They really went to great lengths to make it happen. Another interviewee emphasizes: “There is the other side, those who aren’t willing to change anything at all. They want everything to stay exactly as it is, nothing is allowed to change.”

A further pattern is ignoring change and continuing as before: “Some who only have a few years left until they retire, they say ‘why would I have to work so hard to change things now’, taking things slowly and easy.” Indifference is also reported: “Many people simply don’t care; they take it as it comes.” And: “There are those who say: Business as usual. It just has a different name now, but we’re doing the same thing. So what?”. In contrast, some interviewees describe internalizing change and actively transfer new practices to other colleagues and teams.

4.4.4 Cognitive reactions

Cognitive reactions concern how interviewees interpret and make sense of change processes. A repeated theme is incomprehension, particularly regarding slow processes and unclear decisions: “So we’re growing with subsidiaries, but now we hear that things aren’t going so well for the company. It’s understood that when things aren’t going well, unprofitable assets tend to be sold off. How will this continue? That would be good to know.” Others point to the long duration of post-merger integration: “From an organizational standpoint, a post-merger project like this takes at least a year until all organization steps are completed. I would say, from today’s perspective, it’s still not finished.”

Many express a desire to slow down or pause change to process it cognitively: “The older employees can’t keep up with everything that’s happening every week. Like how the company

suddenly grew [...], some people can't cope with this pace." "In some years, we're doing everything at once [...]. You can't get more change than that." Change is perceived as demanding, and some note that it is currently being "slowed down" somewhat.

Change is also interpreted as an implicit evaluation of past performance: "Such changes are often viewed critically. People think, if something is being remodeled, the maybe you haven't done such a good job."

Several interviewees emphasize that change inevitably creates winners and losers. Resistance is expected particularly when losses are anticipated: "We'll certainly reach a point where we make big changes, where we take something away from someone. And that's always what generates more resistance. But first, we'll try the things that are basically no-brainers, where there are only winners."

At the same time, many articulate a differentiated and reflective point of view. Some reject staff growth without process improvement and call for more modern and flexible working conditions. Others state that change can be positive if shaped by those affected: "I think many people want to work better together." And: "Some would like the changes to be even more radical and faster". Newer or younger colleagues are often perceived as bringing enthusiasm and new ideas.

Finally, interviewees describe moments of cognitive persuasion, where skepticism turns into acceptance: "I know that feeling, at first you have some doubts, you're skeptical, but often you reach a point where you say 'Yes, this idea is convincing me now'."

5 Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings in relation to theoretical foundations and practical context. Section 5.1 summarizes central results of the study. These results are discussed in section 5.2 regarding their contribution to the theoretical framework. In section 5.3, implications for organizational practice are derived, while section 5.4 addresses limitations of the work. Suggestions for future research are made in section 5.5.

5.1 Summary

The study sheds light on how leadership at different levels drives change and how organizational practices can support or complicate this process. The findings describe the case of a municipal energy utility confronted with structural and technological transformation. The company has been through structural transformation in the past four years due to a merger process and a change of shareholder from an international company to the public sector. Since then, the number of employees has grown to more than 1.000 people. Additionally, there is ambitious demand for technological change: energy production as core business model is required to shift from fossil fuels to renewable sources. The coal exit must be implemented within less than 10 years. The company operates in the energy sector, which is directly addressed by many regulations, for example concerning the share of renewable energy over time. Funding programs play a relevant role in the energy sector and many closely controlled requirements must be met for obtaining subsidies. The case setting is an organization embedded in institutionalized environment with a powerful regulatory framework. For decades, coal has been the main primary energy source in this sector, and changes have been historically absent or incremental like introducing natural gas to the fossil portfolio. It is thus a vivid case and clear example for radical change in the institutional field.

The findings show that local leadership practices are behavioral patterns and attitudes through which managers aim to lead their teams through change. A common leadership practice is the leader shaping relationships with their team members. Leaders report a general attitude of appreciation toward the people of their team. One of the most stressed topics is recognizing the individual person behind the role and wanting to understand their motivation and worries. The findings show that leaders aim to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and safety which they often see as the basis of leading change successfully. Highlighting and even celebrating the strengths or wins of the team is seen as an important resource in times of change. At the same time, both leaders and change recipients experience the leadership practice of “holding direction” as highly relevant to successful change. The practice is described as articulating clear

goals and expectations. Several leaders report that they aim to be a fixed point of reference for their teams in times of change. Findings show that perseverance is an important quality, meaning that leaders are more efficient when they persevere through skepticism, inertia or resistance, for example coming from their team. The combination of shaping relationships and holding direction is reported to be especially efficient. Leaders experience progress when they listen and show interest in understanding motivation or opposition, appreciating individual differences, and at the same time remain consistent in demanding change.

Findings show that “driving initiatives” is a further common leadership practice consisting of proactive engagement to drive change within the team or the organization. Leaders report that they campaign for topics or ideas, motivated by the desire to shape content or pace of change in line with their convictions or to lobby for their team’s interests. The data shows that many leaders have a positive attitude towards change, demand change and are willing to discuss or confront management peers to drive initiatives.

A prevalent leadership practice is empowering employees, meaning leaders handing responsibility to employees. It gives employees the authority to make decisions and allows them to actively shape change themselves. Empowerment can be experienced as worthwhile for both employees and leaders: Empowered employees utilize their expertise and proximity to information, while empowering leaders gain time to focus on strategic priorities. It is reported that genuine empowerment requires active participation from employees, since they must accept responsibility and engage in the delegated tasks. Effective empowerment relies on clear communication of expectations and ongoing support from the leader. Leaders also play a mediating role in conflicts and ensure that employees can act without unnecessary obstacles. Clearing the ways or having the back of employees is seen as crucial. Findings indicate that empowerment can turn previously passive into proactive team members, who might generate ideas or solutions that leaders may not have anticipated. However, lack of organizational support or dysfunctional decision hierarchies can frustrate employees, especially when they perceive their empowerment as ineffective. Overall, empowerment does not only depend on local leadership but is closely connected to organizational structures and decision-making frameworks.

Organizational setting and practices play a pivotal role in enabling leaders to enable change. The prevailing mechanisms in the organization determine patterns and habits that form intraorganizational processes which in turn influence the framework that leaders are acting in. Participation as organizational practice stands for the structured involvement of employees and

stakeholders in shaping change, without transferring full responsibility. Participation allows individuals to contribute ideas, give feedback or engage in decisions while ultimate decisions remain with leadership. Findings show that participation is perceived as time consuming but can transform skeptics into active supporters of change. Effective participation requires clarity about scope and boundaries, and it is important that participating employees understand their role. There have been experiences of simulated participation, where objections or indications were not considered, and instead predefined agendas were pushed through.

A further important organizational practice is communication of change. The study shows that when vision and purpose of change are communicated in an inspiring way, it helps to gain people's commitment. Transparency emerged as a repeated theme with positive experiences linked to leaders who openly shared what was happening and what was coming next. Employees expressed a strong desire for more transparency and better explanations of decisions. Many emphasized that honesty is appreciated, even when the messages are uncomfortable. The lack of information about what was going on, or why decisions have been made a certain way, often created uncertainty, surprises or frustration. However, leaders acknowledged the challenge of communicating transparently when they themselves only have limited information.

Another critical organizational practice is structural collaboration, especially across departments. The findings show that collaboration is hindered by historically grown structures with unclear responsibilities and dysfunctional interfaces. While some workflows function well at operational levels, many processes are slowed down, for example by isolated units and information that is withheld or difficult to access. Interviewees describe departments as "kingdoms" within the company. The merger process is often cited as a root cause, as synergies were not fully realized and old structures persisted. This inefficiency leads to frustration because some employees are working on tasks in parallel or struggling to know who to involve for making decisions. A desire to work together with better processes and structures is clearly expressed. These issues are connected to the organization's strategic direction and alignment of departments: The differing objectives and unresolved conflicting targets within the organization make collaboration even more challenging.

Decision-making results as one of the core mechanisms that hinder leaders as well as change-recipients in driving change. Decision-making in the organization is described as highly consensus-oriented, turning the process slow and inefficient. Decisions tend to go through multiple rounds of discussion before being approved. Many people want to be involved in

decisions, even when they are only indirectly affected. Employees struggle to understand why minor issues need broad agreement. It is reported that decisions require informal consultation from various stakeholders during informal pre-meetings in advance of the actual meetings. While this approach may improve long-term commitment during the phase of change implementation, it slows down the initiation phase. Decision-making is further complicated by unclear authority levels. Employees often don't feel empowered to make decisions, while management retains control even over minor issues or budgets. When mistakes occur, decisions are sometimes increasingly escalated to higher levels. However, proximity to the problem and detailed information is limited at senior level. As a result, employees lose understanding, respect or confidence, and managers are overloaded with decisions that could have been handled locally. Closely linked to these bottlenecks is a strong tendency toward risk-averse decision-making and a perceived focus on safety, formal procedures and avoidance of personal liability. Interviewees emphasize that change requires a higher tolerance for uncertainty and more courage in decision-making. Participants find that the organization's strategic drive has been replaced by desire for safety.

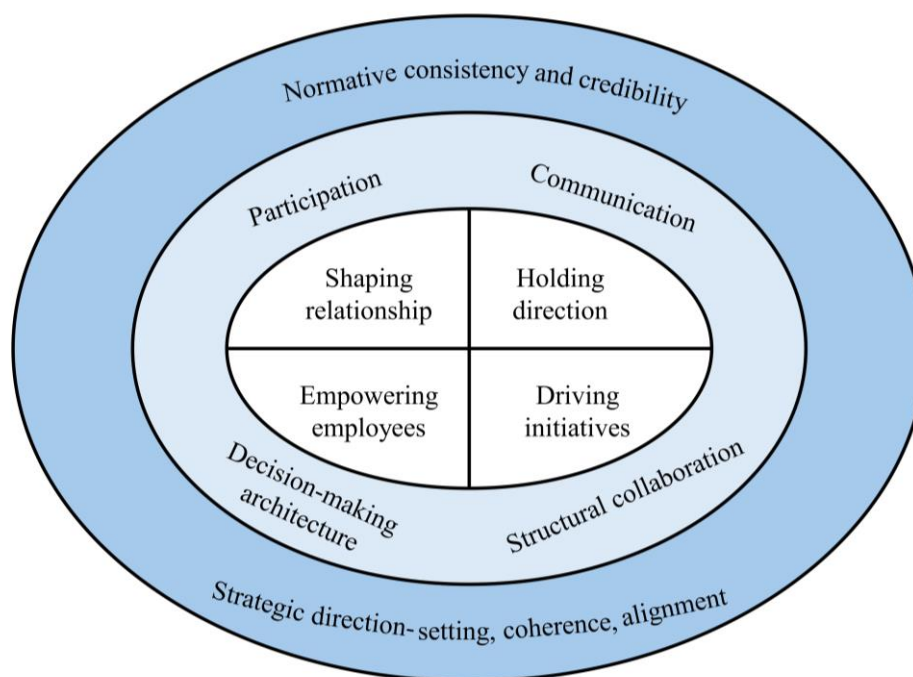
Leadership as organizational orientation refers to the way that leadership provides overall guidance and helps the organization make sense of change. The findings point to two functions. First, strategic direction and alignment play a central role. Especially at top management level, leaders are expected to clarify where the organization is heading and how priorities should be understood across departments and teams. However, interviewees repeatedly describe a lack of clear strategic orientation. Unresolved tension between departments, for example resulting from conflicting performance targets and politically driven conflicting priorities contribute to fragmentation and make it difficult for employees to understand what really matters. Many participants of the study emphasize that translating strategic goals into concrete and concise targets for departments, teams and roles as well as consolidation of leadership and top management are crucial.

Secondly, normative consistency over time and credibility strongly shape how organizational leadership is perceived. Hesitation or ambivalence at top management levels is perceived as demotivating. Credibility is linked to the alignment between what is communicated and what happens. There is a strong call for visible champions of change who provide orientation and commitment, show perseverance and remove obstacles.

The core themes of this work are presented in a layered model in FIGURE 6. The four local leadership practices are centered; they can be deployed in every team. Organizational practices

form the boundary conditions and are relevant not only for single teams but for cross-team and cross-departmental collaboration. The outer layer represents leadership as organizational orientation, setting the climate for the entire organization. All layers are connected; the themes influence each other. For example, driving initiatives is connected to structural collaboration and decision-making, as well as strategic direction and alignment: Leaders drive initiatives to influence strategic choices – for effective initiatives, structural collaboration is needed and decisions must be made. Decision-making architecture is linked to empowering employees. When decision-making is unclear or stalls, empowering is difficult because organizational back-up for empowered employees taking decisions is missing and conflicted target that have not been decided upon at strategic level can not be decided by a single employee, but need to be discussed with many people.

FIGURE 6
Layered model of aggregated dimensions (Source: own illustration)



Reactions to change are diverse and sometimes ambivalent, ranging from enthusiasm and proactive engagement to uncertainty, frustration, resignation and in some cases active resistance. A key aspect concerns different levels of activation. Activation increases when change efforts lead to visible outcomes, and successful initiatives motivate engagement even among previously passive or disheartened employees. In contrast, repeated experiences of rejected ideas, stopped initiatives or unclear decisions lead to declining activation or even passivity. Activation appears to be closely linked to perceived autonomy and efficacy. These dynamics lead to different behavioral reactions, like proactive engagement and active diffusion

of change, especially by ambitious leaders, but also withdrawal or reported exit from the organization. Active opposition occurs when change is perceived as threatening. A common behavioral response is indifference, continuing established routines or adopting a “business as usual” attitude.

Regarding their emotional reactions, many participants express curiosity and a positive attitude towards change on the one hand, and they feel excitement or relief when change finally is implemented. On the other hand, people feel uncertainty, fear or exhaustion, which is often not connected to change content itself, but how it is handled, follows an unclear direction, is delayed or perceived as too slow, or how many unfinished change processes overlap. Concerns about job security and future working conditions also arise. Some interviewees describe growing confidence over time, while others describe a sense of powerlessness that leads to disengagement.

Cognitive reactions explain how participants make sense of change. Incomprehension regarding slow processes, prolonged post-merger integration and unclear decisions is expressed. Several describe moments where initial skepticism turned into acceptance when change became understandable and convincing. Change is sometimes interpreted as an implicit criticism of performance to date and as a process that creates winners and losers. A strong desire for better collaboration, clearer processes are expressed. While some wish to slow down overall change so that the organization can digest and adopt past and ongoing unfinished change, some wish for more radical and faster change to adapt to dynamic market conditions.

5.2 Main discussion points related to core results

The core findings of this study agree with theory that organizations within institutional settings tend to change gradually (Gegenhuber et al., 2022; Greenwood et al., 2002; Schupfer & Soppe, 2025; Scott, 1991). Change is rarely radical in this context, but when radical change is introduced, this might have dramatic consequences for the organizational framework in place (Hinings, 1989). The numerous overlapping and ambitious changes that are required from the organization in this case study can be called radical. The organization groans under the imposed changes and there is a strong commitment to the status quo, a desire for changes to pause, and feelings like uncertainty and fear are expressed. At the same time, there is hope and curiosity among people who see the targeted change as “more appropriate” and convincing than “existing practices”, which according to Greenwood et al. (2002) is necessary for diffusion of new practices (Greenwood et al., 2002, p. 60). While the development of accepted new norms can

take several decades in institutionalized settings with robust prevailing norms, the considered organization has only a few years to radically transform existing business practices.

A central insight of this study is that leadership enabling change cannot be reduced to either relationship-oriented or change-oriented behavior alone. This insight extends existing leadership research, which often treats relationship- and change-oriented behavior as analytically distinct features with empirical studies assessing their separate effects on outcomes such as satisfaction and performance (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Yukl, 2012; Yukl et al., 2019). This perspective is nuanced by the perspective of this case, where relational and directional leadership practices complement each other. The findings suggest that change becomes possible through the combination of both. According to the results, shaping relationships (accepting, being patient, appreciating, understanding, trusting the team), as well as holding direction (providing clear direction, articulating demands, showing perseverance and consistent values) taken together are powerful leadership behaviors that do not work well when isolated. Shaping relationships without holding direction risks becoming overly accommodating, harmony-driven and can lead to making concessions when faced with resistance. Holding direction without relational work risks reducing people to their roles and tasks without recognizing individuals. The data shows that change recipients respond positively and are activated when leaders combine appreciation, patience and genuine interest with clarity, consistency and persistence regarding their change expectations. This combination becomes particularly relevant in contexts marked by unfinished past changes and uncertainty about ongoing and future changes. Institutional theory describes a strong commitment to the status quo and inertia in such settings (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Greenwood et al., 2002), and the findings of this work show how leaders compensate for these dynamics locally by accepting that not all resistance can be resolved immediately, yet remaining firm about the direction of change. Leadership that enables change seems to be a balancing act between acceptance and demand.

Transformational and change-oriented leadership theories emphasize vision, inspiration and the ability to mobilize followers towards a desired future state (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Kotter, 2009; Podsakoff et al., 1990). These models assume that leaders can shape direction and pace of change. The findings of this study contradict those concepts to some extent. This work shows that in a highly institutionalized environment, influence of leaders at middle levels is limited by contextual boundary conditions. Even when leaders aim to drive change and engage in discussion with peers and management boards, they experience inertia, commitment to the status quo and opposition. While they can shape relationships and activate their team locally, they can only to some extent resolve conflicting goals or strategic ambiguity imposed from

above. This study suggests that these leadership practices are more effective when they are supported by credible strategic orientation at higher hierarchical levels. In addition to that, many different leaders campaigning or advocating for their ideas and preferences can lead to perceived fragmentation. In this case, findings show that there is a call for consolidating leadership.

A paradox emerging from the findings is the role of leadership as a fixed point of reference when everything is in motion. Change recipients express a need for fixed points, clear expectations and credible commitment. Not only leadership at local level, but also at higher hierarchical levels is expected to provide stable normative points of reference. In the institutional setting of this case facing radical change, interviewees want orientation regarding goals and priorities. The findings show that when such organizational orientation is missing or perceived as inconsistent, local leaders are forced into a compensatory role. Middle managers aim to be fixed points of reference for their teams while they themselves possess limited information about decisions or priorities. This aligns with research that stresses the critical role of middle managers in translating and implementing change (Heyden et al., 2017). However, the prevalent case adds that translation alone is insufficient when strategic direction remains unclear at the top. The findings suggest that leadership as organizational orientation appears as a function located at higher hierarchical levels, especially in institutional settings, and is hard to delegate downwards. Local leaders might mitigate uncertainty through relationship work and providing as much orientation as possible, but they cannot substitute the tasks of resolving conflicting goals and setting priorities at the top. This supports and extends (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996) argument that radical change requires commitment and enabling power at influential levels.

A further key contribution of this study concerns the role of enablement. In literature, participation is discussed as a predictor of acceptance and readiness for change (Oreg et al., 2018; Oreg et al., 2011). Participation is associated with feelings of control and fairness as well as psychological ownership, resulting in positive reactions to change (Oreg et al., 2018). The findings suggest that empowerment is more decisive than participation alone for activation and sustained engagement in this case. Some interviewees describe participatory formats as frustrating or demotivating when participation is not linked to real influence or decision-making authority. Especially when participation is merely performative, it does not increase activation but contributes to disengagement and fatigue. The findings suggest that in this case, participation alone is insufficient and may even be counterproductive in a setting of prolonged change and unclear strategic priorities. The results challenge the normative framing of

participation that is usually understood as positive (Oreg et al., 2018; Oreg et al., 2011) and resonate with literature that questions participation remaining symbolic or decoupled from influence (Bartunek et al., 2006; Bourgoin et al., 2025). In contrast, this study suggests that empowerment in the sense of delegated responsibility and transmitted decision-making authority is experienced as empowering both for interviewees with and without leadership role. It increases self-efficacy and can activate previously passive employees.

Leadership research frequently conceptualizes empowerment, delegating responsibility, encouraging initiatives or expressing confidence in employees' abilities as a function of leadership behavior (Yukl, 2012). From this perspective, empowering is something leaders do. The findings of this work complicate this view by showing that empowerment is structurally constrained. Empowered employees may have the support from their team and direct manager, but they encounter limits when organizational decision-making, escalation paths and accountability remain centralized. In some cases, predefined scope of authority of employees like decision authority within certain budgetary limits is disregarded by higher hierarchies. Another limiting factor for effective empowerment is strategic direction and alignment, resulting in a lack of clarity and growing uncertainty among empowered employees as they doubt in which direction they should work. This adds another factor to behavior-centered models of empowerment by highlighting that empowerment is not merely a relational or motivational phenomenon, but also an organizational design issue. Leadership behavior can activate potential, but it cannot compensate for structural misalignment. This insight complements Oreg et al. (2018)'s emphasis on perceived control and self-efficacy drive activation by showing that control must be institutionally supported to be sustained, not just encouraged rhetorically. Institutional dynamics further complicate enablement. Risk aversion and consensus orientation reinforce decision centralization, even when leaders express normative support for decentralization.

5.3 Practical implications

The findings of this study suggest several implications for leadership and organizational practice in highly institutionalized contexts facing radical and overlapping change.

Leaders are most effective when they focus on both relational support and demanding change. Perseverance emerges as a critical leadership capability for change. These results suggest that leadership development and recruiting should explicitly address the combination of relationship work and providing and holding direction. Leaders and leadership development should explore, provide and train practical tools for leaders so they can combine the two traits. To support

relational leadership practices, leaders can have meetings with their team members, during which they ask questions, show genuine interest and listen to them actively, instead of talking a lot themselves. Holding direction could be enforced by suitable routines, like starting each team meeting with their ideas and perception of strategic change in the organization. Leadership development should strengthen the ability to recognize emotions and concerns while simultaneously demanding change. This implies supporting leaders in communication skills and in dealing with ambivalence, as they are expected to demand change while fostering trust and psychological safety.

However, individual leadership behavior cannot account for organizational orientation. The findings emphasize the significance of leadership as organizational orientation, particularly at higher hierarchical levels. In this context, characterized by strategic ambiguity and conflicting priorities, employees and local leaders express a need for strategic clarity. Practically, this involves that top management should consolidate strategic goals and solve conflicts between targets. Delegating orientation downwards without resolving contradictions at the top can risk fragmentation and irritate employees. Additionally, visible commitment over time and the willingness to remove obstacles are central leadership responsibilities in institutionalized change contexts because they support leadership credibility. For example, top management could mention their strategic priority in their meetings, consider the priorities in decision-making and communicate their ideas of priorities at all events.

Participation without influence can be demotivating and emotionally exhausting. As a practical implication it is necessary to design participation carefully and to differentiate between participation in the sense of consultation on the one hand and empowerment in the sense of ownership for a topic or task on the other hand. Organizations should be transparent about the scope of influence associated with participatory formats and avoid simulating participation. Surprisingly, empowerment in the sense of employees having decision authority over defined assets or budgets, can be more effective than participation. Empowered employees possess ownership over defined topics and experience self-efficacy and activation. Empowerment is understood as an activity by employees who must accept responsibility, and as a leadership skill. However, findings reveal that leaders encouraging initiative and delegating responsibility at the team level is insufficient in the long term when organizational practices such as decision-making remain centralized. Practically, organizations should review decision-making frameworks and check if their daily practices comply with the responsibility or delegation guidelines in place. Empowering leadership behavior should be accompanied by structural

adjustments within the organization that support empowerment of employees and clear strategic priorities for all departments.

5.4 Limitations

The study offers valuable insights into organizational dynamics of change within a highly institutionalized context. However, some limitations must be recognized.

First, the study presents a specific case. The setting is not generally valid for every firm of the same size in the same sector. The case is situated in the energy sector under complex regulations and shows a context-specific technological transformation. Another specification of the case study is public ownership. These specifications make the case highly interesting and rich because many transformation processes overlap and ambitious change meets not only an institutionalized context but also a business sector that has not shifted in a comparable dimension for many decades. However, this might limit the transferability to business contexts that are less institutionalized or operate in more competitive settings. The case and the qualitative methodology of this study aim not for statistical generalizability but offer analytical interpretations by linking empirical findings to theoretical concepts.

Second, the study captures a snapshot of ongoing change processes. Interviews were conducted within a period of 3 to 4 months, and each participant was only interviewed once. Analyses of archival data reaches back to 2013. Even if questions regarding past, present and future developments were included in the interviews, long term data regarding ongoing change processes is lacking. The lack of longitudinal data is a limiting factor of this work, because it would be insightful to include insights over the coming years, when change is becoming more real and success of change can be evaluated.

Third, the sample includes interviews from different hierarchical levels but access to top management was limited. As a result, interpretations of strategic ambiguity and leadership consolidation are based on perceptions from employees and middle managers. These perceptions are relevant to understanding individual-level responses to change, but they do not reflect the intentions or internal processes at executive management level. Including interviews with executive management in addition to using their statements in archival data such as annual reports could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the organizational system.

Finally, the study analyzes the relation between local leadership behavior, organizational dynamics and reactions to change. However, causal interpretations are only possible regarding a few topics, for example when participants themselves talk about experiences and reasons for

their emotional reactions. Otherwise, causal relations are not concluded, because the qualitative design does not allow for measuring direction or strength of effects.

5.5 Future research

Based on this work, several suggestions for future research are identified.

A differentiated approach to the topic of radical change in institutionalized fields could combine qualitative with quantitative data analysis. This mixed-methods approach could be used to deduct causal relations between phenomena.

Another suggestion is to design a project with several cases to implement a multi-case study. Thereby, different settings in the institutionalized context could be compared. An interesting approach would be to compare cases with different levels of institutionalism, for example private energy utilities, public or private healthcare or regulated industries with stronger market-driven competition. This would help to further analyze how leadership and organizational change are influenced by the degree of institutionalism. One way would be to conduct a meta-analysis of several case studies.

Future research could address the long-term impact of leadership and organizational practices on change outcomes. Therefore, longitudinal research projects with data collection spanning several years or decades would be suitable. The data collection would not necessarily have to be ongoing continuously, but several snapshots over a few years could be a pragmatic approach. In the context of this case study for example, it would be valuable to return in 3 to 5 years and conduct interviews with the same or new participants to find out how their reactions developed over time and how they perceive the change outcomes. In this context, combination of mixed-methods and longitudinal research would be suitable to quantify change success over time while analyzing the quality of change outcomes with interviews.

Emotional reactions to change like hope or anxiety are not only reactions, but they could be determining factors in the level of activation of employees. Future research could build on this work and further examine the role of emotional responses to change to find out how they influence mechanisms of change and change outcome within organizations. Here, a combination of quantitative measurements of affective states could be combined with qualitative insights.

Existing literature often focuses on individual leadership behavior; this study highlights the role of consolidated strategic direction and normative clarity at high hierarchical levels. A valuable research direction would be to further examine the role and mechanisms of leadership as

organizational orientation, how it is constructed and maintained through different hierarchy levels. Especially the role of communication, attitude and expression or presence of top and executive leaders as perceived by employees and by executive management themselves would be of high interest.

The distinction between participation and enablement deserves more research attention. Future research could examine which factors shape perceived self-efficacy and activation of employees. The ways that decisions are made within an organization, the degree of trust that employees are met with and the willingness of employees to take responsibility are interesting factors to investigate in this context. Another sensitive issue is that of efficient participation vs. overly consensus-oriented decision-making. Empirical and theoretical attention could be given to analyzing when participation is useful, and when it turns into inefficient decision-making. Future research could further investigate whether enablement as the concept of decisions being made where most of the information is available is in fact influencing change outcomes and how it could be implemented in a highly institutionalized field. Research could also investigate potential unintended consequences of enablement such as role overload or uneven distribution of responsibility. In this context, it would be interesting to conduct experimental or comparative studies including teams with formal management roles and teams or organizations without those formal roles (self-managing teams) or with rotating (leadership) roles, to find out if these organizational forms can help implement radical change in institutionalized settings.

6 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study's most relevant findings and contributions to provide answers to the research questions.

This work revolves around the case of an energy company managing concurrent structural, strategic and technological changes. Qualitative data was collected and analyzed to answer the research questions "How do leaders enable radical organizational change in a highly institutionalized field?" and "How does the recipients' participation in organizational change relate to their activation levels, emotional reactions and behavioral responses?"

Four dimensions emerged from the data. Firstly, local leadership practices are meaningful in driving organizational change within the institutionalized field of this case. Leaders and employees report firsthand how they experience the combination of relational work and holding direction as effective, because as a result, trust within the team is built and directional clarity is exemplified. Empowering employees, meaning that leaders hand decision-authority and ownership to employees, has been experienced as effective for engaging people in driving change. However, local leadership alone cannot account for organizationally designed processes and overall strategic orientation.

Secondly, organizational practices such as participation, communication, structural collaboration and decision-making architecture significantly shape the conditions under which leadership unfolds. Participation can activate employees, but when it is decoupled from influence it leads to frustration and emotional fatigue. Consensus-oriented and risk-averse decision-making slows down change and constrains effective empowerment.

Thirdly, leadership as organizational orientation at higher hierarchical levels emerges as a crucial precondition for enabling radical change. Strategic clarity as well as normative consistency and visible commitment from top management are perceived as stabilizing reference points in this case, especially when multiple changes overlap. When this orientation is missing and when strategic ambiguity is prevalent, middle managers must take on a compensatory role and empowerment of employees is limited.

Reactions to change vary strongly and depend on the individual situation and person. They seem to be linked to autonomy and influence. Activation increases when initiatives lead to tangible outcomes and employees experience self-efficacy.

The first research question asked how leaders enable radical organizational change in a highly institutionalized context. The findings show that enabling change in such context is a multi-

level process. At the local level, leaders enable change by combining relational work with holding direction. By listening to their team members and acknowledging emotions, they build trust, while at the same time articulating expectations and persevering through resistance. Leaders enable radical change by driving initiatives, campaigning for topics they consider necessary. They empower employees by delegating responsibility and protecting employees' decision space.

However, these leadership practices are structurally connected to organizational practices and orientation. Especially in this highly institutionalized field characterized by regulation and political expectations as well as historical norms and patterns, radical change challenges these embedded patterns. While local leadership can activate and stabilize teams, it cannot substitute for strategic clarity and normative consistency at higher hierarchical levels. Radical change in this context seems to require high and visible genuine commitment at the top, which cannot be delegated fully. Enabling change in this context is the result of an interplay between local relational-directional leadership practice and credible strategic alignment at the organizational level.

The second research question asked how change recipients' participation relates to activation, emotional and behavioral reactions. The findings indicate that participation alone in this context does not automatically lead to activation. When participation remains symbolic or participants are not listened to, it may even decrease engagement. In contrast, empowerment of employees as genuine decision-authority and ownership over defined tasks fosters perceived control and self-efficacy, which in turn leads to higher activation and proactive behavior. Empowerment is structurally bound as well, since organizational decision-making frameworks in place are central to hinder or support decentralized decision-making by empowered employees. For effective empowerment of employees, the organizational decision-making framework must be designed accordingly.

This case illustrates the tension between historically stabilized institutional norms and urgent transformation demands. While the energy transition is ongoing and the need for rapid decarbonization in regulated sectors is becoming more urgent with each year that does not meet the emissions reduction targets, organizations in similar contexts are facing comparable challenges of combining cultural or organizational changes with technological transformation. This study shows that radical change in institutionalized fields is possible, but requires alignment between leadership behavior, organizational design and strategic commitment across hierarchy levels. In conclusion, enabling radical organizational change in a highly

institutionalized field is a systemic process rather than a specific leadership style. Local leadership practices engage people directly, but organizational practices such as processes of collaboration, ways of communicating and decision-making frameworks, as well as strategic orientation and consistency are the relevant levers for enabling change. By examining leadership and organizational practices, this work provides an understanding of how radical transformation can be initiated and sustained in institutionalized environments.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Interim coding structures

Documentation of the coding process in chronological order

FIGURE 7
Original screenshot from MAXQDA interim coding structure 1, first order coding
 (Source: own screenshot)

LSC_providing guidance while fostering autonomous work	3
CC_no shared understanding or culture across the company	5
CC_corporate culture transitioned from formal to familiar to...	2
CC_shift from profit-driven to politically guided leadership	2
LP_limited HR involvement in supporting organizational ch...	1
LP_change initiatives require champions with leadership su...	1
LP_change attention diminishes under daily routine	1
LP_inconsistent management direction	3
LP_political proximity to decision-making influences willing...	1
LP_strong hierarchical influence of divisional leaders	1
LP_finance department as necessary and sometimes too we...	1
LP_perceived governance/law department overreach into d...	1
LP_challenge of managing competing objectives	1
LP_abstract openness toward general change shifts when in...	7
LP_advocating for team participation and decision authority	3
CC_CEO shift toward formalized, risk-averse decision-making	2

FIGURE 8
Original screenshots from MAXQDA interim coding structure 2, first and second order coding
 (Source: own screenshot)

Codes	669
Verhalten und Wirken Führungskraft (aber auch MA?)	0
strategisches Wirken, campaigns, initiieren, Einstellung...	47
Beziehungsarbeit: Vertrauen, Sicherheit, Stärkung, Akze...	29
Klarheit, fordernd, zukunftsorientiert	29
Normative Orientierung, Führung als Fixpunkt, gemeinsame...	75
politischer Einfluss, Zielkonflikte	25
Enablement, Verantwortung der MA	51
Partizipation, Mitbestimmung, Kommunikation	0
Kommunikation u. Transparenz	61
Partizipation	38
Bereichsstrukturen, Zusammenarbeit zw. Bereichen	64
Entscheidungsarchitektur, Entscheidungsfindung	44
Unterstützung (für FK) bei Change	15
Reaktion auf Veränderung	0
Akzeptanz	2
Überforderung	9
Aktivierung und Hoffnung	27
Resignation	10
Unzufriedenheit, Frustration, Ärger, Ablehnung	20
Sorgen, Ungewissheit, Angst, Nervosität	21
Gleichgültigkeit	5
Ambivalenz	17

TABLE 3.

Original MAXQDA interim coding structure 3, aggregate dimensions, first and second order coding (Source: own, direct export from MAXQDA)

<i>Liste der Codes</i>		<i>Häufigkeit</i>
Codesystem		816
Strukturelle und prozessuale Zusammenarbeit im Change		0
	Partizipation	51
	Kommunikation und Transparenz	80
	Zusammenarbeit zw. Bereichen	63
	Wahrgenommene Unübersichtlichkeit	5
	Entscheidungsarchitektur, Entscheidungsfindung	63
	Konsensorientierte Entscheidungsfindung	1
	Level der Entscheidungsfindung	3
	Risikoaversion, fehlender Mut zur Entscheidung	12
	Wahrnehmung von Führung	0
	Nahbarkeit der Geschäftsführung	3
	Zielkonflikte	12
	Verantwortungsübernahme, Konsequentes Handeln der Führung	25
	(Interessens)konflikte Bereiche	12
	Machtaffinität im Führungskreis	4
	Normative Orientierung	37
	Unverständnis zwischen Bereichen, Delegitimation, Entwertung	9
	Keine übergreifende Unternehmenskultur, zwei Welten	5
	Keine gemeinsame Vision, unterschiedliche Ziele	4
	Politischer Einfluss	25
Verhalten und Wirken Führungskraft (aber auch MA?)		0
	Enablement, Verantwortung der MA	72
	Schlichtungsfunktion der Führung	0
	Strategisches Wirken, campaigns, initiieren, Einstellung zu Change	62
	Beziehungsarbeit: Vertrauen, Sicherheit, Stärkung, Akzeptanz	46
	Klarheit, fordernd, zukunftsorientiert	53
Unterstützung (für FK) bei Change		21
Reaktion auf Veränderung		0
	Aktivierungslevel	22
	Affektive/emotionale Reaktionen	83
	Verhaltensreaktionen	17
	Kognitive Reaktionen	26

TABLE 4.

Original MAXQDA interim coding structure 4, aggregate dimensions, first and second order coding with memos (Source: own, direct export from MAXQDA)

Liste der Codes			Memo	Häufigkeit
Codesystem				782
	Organizational Practices		Strukturelle und prozessuale Zusammenarbeit im Change/Organisationale Kollaboration, Entscheidungsarchitektur, ...	0
	Partizipation			5
		Gestaltungsspielraum klären		6
		misslungene Partizipation		5
		wirksame Partizipation		18
	Kommunikation/organizational communication and participation practices			5
		strategisch kommunizieren/Stakeholder und Timing		9
		Menschen überzeugen und begeistern		6
		Wunsch nach Transparenz		3
		Entscheidungen transparent erklären	Entscheidungen erklären, Leute frühzeitig informieren	20
		unangenehme Botschaften klar ansprechen und vertreten	möglichst frühzeitig, Begründungen schreiben, auch wenn man es selbst nicht zu vertreten hat nichts beschönigen	13
		intransparente Kommunikation/Entscheidungen		20
	strukturelle Kollaboration		Zusammenarbeit zw. Bereichen	12
		Abschottung, Infos nicht offen legen wollen		5
		Wunsch nach besserer Abstimmung		8
		Doppelstrukturen		10
		Schnittstellenprozesse, Abstimmung nicht funktional		15
		wahrgenommene Unübersichtlichkeit		6
	Entscheidungsarchitektur, Entscheidungsfindung			14
		Konsensorientierte Entscheidungsfindung, hoher Abstimmungsaufwand	auch: alle wollen mitreden, selbst wenn sie nur mittelbar betroffen sind bzw. die Informationen eigentlich woanders vorliegen	14
		unklares Level der Entscheidungsfindung		15
		Risikoaversion, fehlender Mut zur Entscheidung	Überbetonung der rechtlichen Absicherung	20
	Leadership as organizational orientation		vormals: Verantwortung GF: Aufgaben, Anspruch, Übersetzungsfunktion der Politik von außen	0
	Strategic orientation		Wo wollen wir hin? Was hat Priorität? politischer Einfluss von außen -> Zielkonflikte aus Politik werden ins Unternehmen getragen -> wenn Zielkonflikte nicht gelöst werden, ist die strategische Ausrichtung unklar -> keine gemeinsame Vision	23
		politischer Einfluss		24
		Zielkonflikte		13

Liste der Codes			Memo	Häufigkeit
		Consistent action, normative orientation	Verantwortungsübernahme, Konsequentes Handeln der Führung den Laden zusammenhalten Vermitteln, was gewollt ist -> credibility große Überschneidung mit Kommunikation	38
		Strategic alignment	differences within organization Heterogenität innerhalb der Organisation zwischen Bereichen bestehen Interessenskonflikte - keine gemeinsame Vision, unterschiedliche Ziele (Interessens)konflikte Bereiche es sind unterschiedliche Kulturen, Einstellungen zu Change und Machtaffinität da es gibt untereinander ein großes Unverständnis/wie ist das Verständnis füreinander?	20
		keine übergreifende Unternehmenskultur, unterschiedliche Welten		10
		Einstellung zu Change: Beharrungsvermögen vs Vorangehen		8
		Machtaffinität im Führungskreis		5
		Unverständnis zwischen Bereichen, Delegation, Entwertung		11
		Leadership practices	Verhalten und Wirken Führungskräfte	0
		Enabling employees	Enablement, Verantwortung der MA Verantwortung nach unten geben, delegieren, befähigen klar darüber kommunizieren, Menschen an die Verantwortung heranführen, Menschen ermutigen, dass sie das können, Eigenverantwortung anregen das ist auch entlastend für Führungskraft als FK von MA lernen als FK vertrauen Voraussetzungen sind: normative Orientierung, also im Endeffekt die Entscheidung: wo soll es überhaupt hingehen? Was sind unsere Ziele? und übergreifende Entscheidungsarchitektur, die Enablement der MA zulässt (s. Rückhalt nach oben, s. unklares Level der Entscheidungsfindung)	31
		Verantwortung annehmen, Wunsch nach Enablement	Selbstwirksamkeit wird erfahren, wenn der Rückhalt da ist, wenn man wirklich etwas bewegt. Enablement ohne Rückhalt nach oben funktioniert nicht, wirkt demotivierend	13
		nicht gelebtes Enablement		5
		Rückhalt nach oben ist ausschlaggebend	dysfunktionales Enablement wegen mangelndem Rückhalt/Orientierung	9
		Verantwortung nicht annehmen/hochdelegieren		3
		Schlichtungsfunktion der Führung		10
		Driving initiatives	strategisches Wirken, campaigns, initiieren, Einstellung zu Change	35

Liste der Codes			Memo	Häufigkeit
		sich einsetzen für Veränderung/campaignen	mitgestalten, kämpfen, diskutieren und argumentieren Change "durchkämpfen"/ durchboxen "für das eigene Anliegen werben" Kompromisse aushandeln	9
		strategisches, vorausschauendes Denken und Planen		9
		Shaping relationship	Beziehungsarbeit: Vertrauen, Sicherheit, Stärkung, Akzeptanz	9
		admitting weaknesses	Being human and vulnerable, showing different aspects of authentic self, admitting gaps in knowledge or skill set and dealing with them confidently	3
		support individual wishes/talent		6
		Reassure employees		3
		Vertrauen schenken		3
		auf Stärken verweisen		1
		Präsenz, Kontakt und Austausch		13
		Sicheres Arbeitsumfeld gestalten	Fehlerkultur - Offenheit, denn gerade in Veränderungen geschehen Fehler, wenn z.B. Prozesse angepasst werden, neue Technologien eingesetzt werden o.ä.	8
		Wahrnehmung und Wertschätzung	Menschen sehen, so wie sie sind. Menschen so annehmen und akzeptieren und wertschätzen Menschen verstehen, zuhören - was treibt MA wirklich um?	7
		Enacting/Holding direction	Persistent direction-setting Klarheit, fordernd, zukunftsorientiert	20
		Setting boundaries and acting consistently		3
		Veränderung vorleben/Vorbild sein	Überschneidung mit Menschen überzeugen und begeistern	6
		Beharrlichkeit, Leader als Fixpunkt	auch: klare Zielvorgabe setzen - Überschneidung mit normativer Orientierung	19
		Reaktion auf Veränderung		0
		Aktivierungslevel		23
		Affektive/emotionale Reaktionen		87
		Verhaltensreaktionen		17
		Kognitive Reaktionen		27
		Unterstützung (für FK) bei Change		22

8.2 AI Prompting

Direct citation of used prompts.

- For naming a code label: Synonymous with impact, champion, courage, ability to make decisions?
- I structured the findings session based on my data structure. This also means that they are segmented into separate chapters/subchapters for each dimension. Where should I then discuss the relationships and connections between the dimensions?
- Don't "behavioral reactions" overlap with "levels of activation"? Because logically, how you behave shows what level of activation you have. Should I combine them?
- What typical limitations of qualitative/interview-based research methodology are discussed in organizational research?
- Should I include documentation of interim results of coding in my final thesis? They are NOT the final results of my coding structure.
- Which parts of my discussion rely strongly on interpretation rather than empirical evidence of this work?
- Check if this introduction, discussion and conclusion are logically coordinated. Point out any possible inconsistencies or redundancies.
- Which parts of scientific papers are often perceived as unclear by readers?
- Correction or ideas for improvement of this sentence: Here, organization-wide practices are described that often relate to interdepartmental collaboration.
- Help me plan my remaining work for my master thesis. I have 5 weekends left (I can only work on weekends). I am done with methodology, findings and need to finish discussion, work on literature und conclusion as well as finish the introduction. I have already 55 pages. Thesis is limited to 60 pages.
- What are typical bottlenecks from now to finish?
- Sparring of thoughts and doubts throughout the process, discussion of perceived analytical /content-related contradictions (very long and detailed prompting of around 250 words).