

# **Two stories at ustwo – one too many?**

A case study of a knowledge-intensive firm undergoing  
change

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## Abstract

<b>Title</b>	Two stories at ustwo – one too many? A case study of a knowledge-intensive firm undergoing change
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<b>Key words</b>	Organizational Development, Change, KIF, SIT, Identity-work, resistance
<b>Purpose</b>	Our purpose is to show how two opposing stories are prevalent in a change process and to create an understanding of how a phenomena viewed as resistance in the field of OD can be understood in other ways.
<b>Methodology</b>	This qualitative research was conducted adhering to a social constructivist perspective.
<b>Theoretical Perspectives</b>	An identity perspective was applied.
<b>Empirical Foundation</b>	A case study based on nine semi-structured interviews with employees affected by organizational change.
<b>Result</b>	An additional understanding of two opposing stories during a change process as identity management in the form of control and support.

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# 1. Introduction

“You could be kind of yesterday’s news pretty quickly. So the focus or the shift that I am kind of part of creating, is to be able to adapt to change and collaboration and this kind of things that is needed in the new context that we kind of live in.”

The quote above was stated by an OD change agent at a knowledge-intensive firm during an interview when reflecting on the current state of the world.

In today’s society a great focus is put on change, both media and scholars point to a changing world where being flexible and able to adapt as an organization is essential for future success. The question is not so much “Do we need to change?” rather it is “How do we change?”. Answering this, a burgeoning field of change management approaches is at hand. One of the most influential approaches has been Organizational Development, OD. Stemming from the 1940’s, the approach has not lost its momentum or importance (Bushe & Marshak 2009). The approach, based on humanistic, democratic and developmental values, emphasizes the need for a common understanding of the change in order to create alignment and acceptance for the same (Cummings & Worley 2001). In this context, Ford and Ford (1995) note how “change is embedded in talk” and Brown and Humphreys (2003) describe how understandings of change take the shape of constructed stories told by employees affected.

This text presents a case study conducted at a knowledge-intensive firm, hereby labeled KIF, undergoing an extensive change process following an OD approach. KIFs are receiving a lot of attention from scholars and media, particularly in Western Society and are an increasing sector of the economy (Alvesson 2004; Newell et al. 2009). Since KIFs are based on their human capital, the knowledge workers are their main competitive advantage. KIFs

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are therefore highly committed to, and dependent of, their personnel and are at times labelled “people-intensive”; organizations where “systems, structures, technologies, and products matter much less than personnel do...” (Alvesson 2004:207).

Research points to how many change initiatives fail. When put in numbers percentages up to 70% are offered and reasons are given as to why changes fall flat such as “a potentially significant reason for this is a lack of alignment between the value system of the change intervention and of those members of an organization undergoing the change” (Burnes & Jackson 2011:133).

As the initial quote shows, the OD change agent of a KIF, the setting for this case study, is feeling the pressure from a changing world. The feeling might very well be enhanced by research pointing to the high rate of failure attached to change initiatives. Change is of importance in today’s business world, it is linked to company success but always shadowed by the risk of failure. OD presents the humanistic key of common understanding to open the door to successful change. In the context of a KIF, a modern day organization contingent on humans, a humanistic approach to change is worth attention.

## 1.1. Problematization

As KIFs are labelled “people-intensive” (Alvesson 2004:207) and OD is based on humanistic values, change being implemented at a KIF through an OD approach seems reasonable. The OD logic of creating change by involvement and thereby creating a common understanding acknowledges the people-side of business and it is well matched with KIFs being built upon their employees. However, despite its humanistic aim the field of OD is not spared from the ugly face of resistance. Opposing understandings, stories, of change are seen as disrupting the single common understanding guiding thoughts and actions towards successful change. Therefore it is understood as resistance.

Drawing on our view of reality as socially constructed we argue that this perspective on resistance is narrow minded and too one-sided in that it implies that there is one “correct” understanding present, turning other understandings into resistance. In a world that is subjective, constantly negotiated and constructed into sometimes overlapping views there is no such thing as truths or right and wrong. It implies an either-or thinking regarding one understanding being replaced by another.

Our case study presented us with two stories of the change process a) a story of how the change for implementing structures is needed and b) a story told of how structures can be understood as corporate and therefore bad. From an OD perspective the second storyline appears as an opposing understanding to the one common enabling change. The second storyline would in this view be understood as resistance. However, at the case company resistance is not understood as present. A finding that falls outside the frames of OD and Brown and Humphreys’ (2003) writings on how stories construct common understandings. This finding leads us to ask the following question.



## **1.2. Research question**

How can two opposing stories in an OD change process at ustwo be understood?

## **1.3. Purpose**

Our purpose is to show how two opposing stories are prevalent in a change process and to create an understanding of how a phenomena viewed as resistance in the field of OD can be understood in other ways.

## **2. Method and methodology**

In the following section our paradigm, based on social constructivist notions, will be discussed. A paradigm entails conceptions regarding ontology and epistemology and holds great significance for the methodology used (Burrell & Morgan 1979). A paradigm serves as a basis for any study and has great implications for what should be studied and how results will be interpreted (Bryman & Bell 2005).

### **2.1. Ontological and epistemological considerations**

Our study is grounded in a socially constructed view on reality, meaning a firm belief that individuals carry subjective understandings of the world, creating subjective meanings of their experiences. However, subjective sense making by human beings does not take place in a vacuum. As Creswell (2003:8) states: “Often these meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others”. This is our ontological position.

Closely related to a researcher’s worldview is what can be seen as knowledge (Burrell & Morgan 1979), labeled epistemology. Depending if reality is considered to be objective or subjective, what is possible to be considered as knowledge is highlighted. A researcher’s epistemology answers the questions if knowledge can be obtained and transferred and if causal relationships can be drawn based on facts being true or false.

Bearing in mind the ontological assumption of reality as socially constructed OD appears one-sided. This as the field points to a nearly causal relationship between creating one common understanding, avoiding opposing understandings meaning resistance, which in turn leads to a successful change process. Still, the OD logic is said to be based on a socially constructed view of reality as it acknowledges differing understandings that can be constructed through change processes into one common understanding.

However, our research, which is firmly grounded in the same ontology, questions the notion of downplaying opposing understandings to simply resistance to the one, correct, constructed common understanding in the field. Acknowledging the social construct of reality, the OD field's understanding of differing understandings of change as resistance is viewed just as such, an understanding. Contrasted to an objective take on reality where it would be presented as a truth or a fact about change processes our ontological standpoint allows us to research the claim in order to create understanding around the phenomena of resistance and possibly understand it in other ways. This ambition is visible in the research question posed: How can two opposing stories in an OD change process at ustwo be understood? Our purpose is thus to create an understanding of how what is presented nearly as a fact, in our case resistance, could be understood in other ways. Stemming from our ontological perspective we strive to contribute with ways of looking at a phenomenon, we do not present truths, as it would be contradictory to our epistemology. We can only hope for investigating "socially invented truths" (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2012: 207) and provide possible understandings of the same.

## **2.2. An inductive qualitative study**

Given our assumption of reality as socially constructed our approach has been shaped by our interest in people's experiences and perceptions. This study is based on an inductive research approach, following the notion that theory is born out of the empirical data and not tested against it (Bryman & Bell 2005:25). As stated by Creswell (2003:181), "qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured" and as a consequence different aspects reveal themselves during the study rather than being predefined.

The study's focus has been empirically driven meaning that what appeared as interesting to create further understanding about has stemmed from the

interviewee's accounts of their social reality. This rather than us as researchers attempting to match statements and observation with predefined theory.

Our inductive approach made us sensitive to handling the material, letting us be led by it. This made the road to a research question long and bumpy when much in the material pointed to different directions. Adding to this much of the material evoked our interest almost to a point where it was overwhelming. The finding of the two opposing stories that would later on shape our research question gradually appeared in the material and the first notion of it was the use of swear words in combination with the term corporate by employees.

Often, an inductive approach towards research is criticized due to different assumptions on the need for generalizability of a study (Bryman & Bell 2005:508). This is particularly relevant considering the fact that our case study focuses on a small, unique setting. However, as social constructivist researchers we are aware of the multi-layered nature of reality and the contribution of this case study as rather being one potential way to understand the constructed stories in a change process. Qualitative work rarely focuses on measuring variables in the traditional sense but rather is interested in understanding a phenomenon based on actors reality (Bryman & Bell 2005:297). The traditional considerations of validity, reliability and generalizability are mainly rooted in quantitative research and thus have a minor role in inductive, qualitative work. These are primarily concerned about measurement methods and opportunities to repeat study. As attention is paid to the social reality of a specific context, the case company, and the reality is constructed of multiple subjective perceptions the possibility to replicate the case study and reach the same result providing proof for certain theoretical assumptions appear bizarre.

## 2.3. The case study

### 2.3.1. Company presentation

ustwo, founded in 2004 by two friends and initially called the 'studio of dreams', is a digital design studio specialized in interaction and user interface design, offering its products and services to an international client base. The company has offices in New York, London as well as in Malmö, Sweden, the location of this case study. At present, 200 employees belong to the *fampany*, a combination of the words *company* and *family* that is internally used referring to the firm. With employees being the most valuable asset to the firm bringing their knowledge and expertise ustwo is classified as a knowledge-intensive firm. The studio in Malmö currently employs 55 designers, developers as well as administrative staff. Within the studio products for clients such as Sony and H&M are created in multi-discipline design and development projects based on agile processes. While having a rather flat organizational structure another distinctive feature at ustwo is the presence of four team coaches. These coaches substitute for conventional project manager in an attempt to facilitate agile working structures.

Due to an expanding client base ustwo experienced a rapid growth and especially the studio in Malmö was extensively hiring new employees. As a result of this, the organization and first and foremost the studio in Malmö experiences the need for change. This change is an act of balancing advantages and disadvantages outgrowing organizational structures of an adhocracy while still adhering to the human-centric side of the business. Taking on the function of change agents in order to help the studio accomplish this act the aforementioned team coaches play an important role. Being hired to facilitate change at different levels within the organization it is their task to connect the business and the employees to set the course for a future state of ustwo.

## **2.4. Data collection**

Adhering to the underlying paradigmatic assumptions we employed a set of qualitative research methods. Through interviews, observations and documents empirical material has been gathered.

### **2.4.1. Interviews**

Our empirical material to this study was largely based on interviews with employees at ustwo. Interviews were semi-structured as we prepared only broad themes of interest before each interview but also integrated questions and topics that appeared to be of interest within the interview context (Bryman & Bell 2011: 248). This highly flexible approach allowed us to adapt to the emergent empirical data in an inductive manner.

Interviewees were chosen based on their belonging to the firm and availability. Starting with initial interviews with our contact persons, Adler and Mellander, we subsequently approached other members of the organization. Thereby it was important to have one contact person inside the firm helping us to gain access to further interviewees. Without this it would have been much more difficult to encourage employees to spend their time with us.

In the course of this research we conducted interviews on different levels of the case company. In total we conducted nine interviews with employees, as listed below. Each employee was interviewed a single time for 45 - 60 minutes, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed at its full for matters of analysis. In the following text all interviewees will be referred to as *employees* unless otherwise stated.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Position in the firm</b>
P. Mellander	Team Coach
M. Adler	Team Coach
M. Gedin	Team Coach
M. Samuels	Team Coach
T. Martyn	Human Resources Manager
M. Woxneryd	Managing Director Malmö Studio
M. Persson	Developer
P. Marques	Designer
M. Gobec:	Designer

### **2.4.2. Observations and document analysis**

Next to interviews we had the opportunity to observe an internal workshop designated to clarify the roles of managers assigned to a specific client project. The employee part of the project were encouraged to discuss their needs and wants concerning the managers. The opportunity to join the workshop as observers occurred rather spontaneously but enabled us to get an even deeper insight to the situation at ustwo. We were able to observe different roles in the organization and see how employees relate to each other.

To gain further insights and knowledge of the situation and context of ustwo we studied the corporate website. Job advertisements were on our request handed to us from one of the team coaches and used as an addition to our knowledge base (Bowen 2009) regarding the role clarification inherent in the ongoing change process. Newspaper articles were studied in an initial stage of the research process and mainly functioned to inspire possible questions or themes at an early stage of interviewing.

### **2.5. Data analysis - hermeneutics**

Approaching the empirical material we followed a hermeneutic approach, targeting to understand the ongoing process of change and the understanding of this by employees at ustwo. In circular movements we moved between

parts of the empirical material, e.g. textual material from interviews, while bearing the context in mind (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009). This implied moving between understanding and pre-understanding, being aware of a multi-layered reality. Collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data was not a linear undertaking with clearly isolated activities but rather a circular process. Data that had been collected was transcribed, read through and continuously the transcripts were consulted for possible themes of interest. This involved breaking the empirical material from interviews into small but significant parts and reassembling these in a meaningful way (Creswell 2003). Employing a hermeneutic dialogue, arising themes were then constantly compared to the empirical material as a whole and our pre-understanding of theory.

As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003: 968) state, it is important to note: “the researcher’s pre-understanding and familiarity with theory will always affect how she or he makes sense of a research topic”. As knowledge is a social construction we need to be aware of our own assumptions and views that are likely to influence the overall research process and our interpretations of data. Our aim was to look behind the façade, understand and possibly reveal underlying logic and meaning employees ascribe to the circumstances of change at *ustwo* (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2000). In the same time we recognized how our background influenced the process and our interpretations of the material, positioning ourselves in the research rather than being objective outsiders (Creswell 2003).

## **2.6. A localist perspective on interviews**

Different from a romanticism perspective on interview accounts, where trust within the interview situation is seen as the important prerequisite to gain access to the “inner world or experienced social reality of the interviewee” (Alvesson 2011: 18), we leaned towards a reflexive perspective collecting and analyzing the empirical material, acknowledging the interview situation as producing situated accounts. Drawing on Alvesson’s (2003)



work two perspectives on interviews are highlighted to point to the need of awareness from us as researchers.

### **2.6.1. The interview as establishing and perpetuating basic assumptions**

Awareness should be paid to how interviewees are influenced by the ambition to give the ‘right’ answers based on their own understanding of the situation. This includes matters of being as cooperative as possible as well as portraying competence based on the interpretation of what the researcher is looking for (Alvesson 2003). Following statement was uttered in an interview:

”And they make these kind of questionnaires that you maybe have seen in school, on how many are actively engaged in what they do...”

It entails a notion that the researchers are viewed as students and are probably interested in hearing about rather academic tools. Furthermore, on one occasion one of the interviewee’s turned to a white board in order to draw a model showcasing the complications related to growth in firms. This action point to an understanding of the researchers as students searching for answers in academic models and graphs.

### **2.6.2. The interview as application of a cultural script**

Interviewees may turn to cultural scripts, e.g. metaphors, in order to communicate “how it really is” to the interviewer (Alvesson 2003:20). In a pressured situation such as an interview where time is limited and people are usually strangers to each other, cultural scripts may facilitate giving an account of what is going on. However, statements can be seen as ways for participants to construct their own world in an orderly fashion rather than mirroring how they experience the world they engage in at work (Alvesson 2003:21).

”It’s when you learn the guitar, you do scales first. If you just play guitar and never trained it sucks ass to start formalizing that but then after that you don’t do scales to do scales you do to improvise so it just took us, it took us three months to get to a place when “Okay, now we’ve formalized it, now we make it less formal, less exclusive again.”

In this quote the interviewee is responding to a question concerning how to keep a human-centric focus while growing. The statement above can be understood as the interviewee drawing on a cultural script, viewing change in a certain matter to reduce his own ambiguity in relation to change, this rather than explaining how change is actually conducted at the company.

Acknowledging that the interview situation is not merely a setting of reaching clear-cut insights to context and understandings we have aimed for a more deliberate approach to interviews. Meaning that the researcher should be aware that the material that emerges from the interviews is highly subjective and possibly biased influencing the interpretations. However, the idea is not to reject the interviewees' statements as untrue but rather to highlight and observe the ambiguous nature of the material.

## 3. Theory

### 3.1. The Theory of Organizational Development

The Organization Development, OD, approach to managing change emerged during the 1940s and 1950s. Based on humanistic, democratic and developmental values relating to openness, involvement and self-realization, respectively. These values and thereby OD as a research field, was considered controversial during a time with a heavy emphasis on hierarchy, rationality and authority in organizations (Palmer *et al.* 2009). The field spans over several different ways of managing change based on the approach's core values. Burke and Bradford (2005:12) define the concept of OD as such:

“Based on (1) a set of values, largely humanistic; (2) application of the behavioral sciences; and (3) open systems theory, organization development is a system wide process of planned change aimed toward improving overall organizational effectiveness...”

In implementing change following an OD approach, the change agent is considered of great significance. Palmer *et al.* (2009: 31) label the OD practitioner “coach” drawing on the metaphor of a sports coach. Like a coach of a sports team is able to shape the capabilities of the team so that they are able to perform and succeed during a game, a competitive situation, an OD coach is said to be able to do the same thing in an organizational context. An OD coach is contrasted to a change manager implementing change by dictating people on what to do in order to change. Rather, a coach is seen as changing the frameworks that guide what people think and say. “By focusing on the symbols, images, and narratives used to make meaning, and changing those, changes in behavior are self-generated (Bushe & Marshak 2009:355).” In line with the humanistic values of OD the act of changing is placed at the hands of the people affected by organizational change, rather than being dictated to change. Coaches are there to provide them with a mindset, a framework that enables change.

Furthermore, Bushe and Marshak (2009) explain how an OD approach, based on the notion that reality is socially constructed and organizations are to be understood as meaning-making systems, is about creating events and interventions where organizational members can increase their awareness of the variety of experiences constructing their reality. Through awareness *about* and *in* a system it can change, awareness create alignment and support for change. The coach role is to facilitate and enable the process. In this communication is crucial. “We propose that communication is the generative mechanism of change that gives people the reality in which they live (Giddens 1984; cited in Ford & Ford 1995:560).” The role of an OD coach is to make sense of the social reality and redirect change through altering meanings by new language and enriched dialogue (Weick & Quinn 1999).

Palmer *et al.* (2009:293) describe OD coaches approach towards communication as driven by a focus of “getting buy-in”, that’s is engage in dialogue about the change process to ensure that people share the same values and mind-sets and are aware of actions congruent with these. As OD is concerned with changing the frameworks, values and mind-sets guiding what people think and say, in contrast to changing the behavior of people directly, resistance is said to be avoided. This is based on the assumption that people do not resist change per se, however they resist *being* changed (Bushe & Marshak 2009). Being able to understand the need for change and being part of it helps not only to create acceptance for change but is seen as the foundation for change. As Ford and Ford (1995:561) state: “Producing intentional change in organizations now becomes a matter of creating and shifting conversations rather than bringing about an alteration in object-like attributed, traits, conditions, or circumstances.” Hence, it is not only telling the story of change but creating a new speech embedding the change within the organization to increase organizational efficiency and foster individual performance.

Brown and Humphreys (2003) argue that narratives play a big part in communicating change. They point to how human beings are essentially story-telling animals, creating common understandings through telling stories. In a change process, a merger of two colleges, they found that management told the story of epic change to create a common understanding whilst subordinates told the story of a tragedy shaping their understanding of the merger. The authors explain the differing stories as: “the shared narratives of subordinate groups are a significant means by which they attempt to contest and resist the worldviews of their superiors” (2003:137). In managing change not having a common understanding but rather differing understandings, stories, would be a sign of resistance.

### **3.2. Resistance**

Fleming and Spicer (2010:30) argue that resistance is to be seen as in a particular relationship to power. The writers define resistance in the following statement: “If power in the workplace involves a set of rules and influences that attempt to determine the coordinates of work behavior and subjectivity, then resistance is an act that disrupts the process of those who are being dominated.” Given this definition, resistance in relation to change represents an act of disruption hindering the change process. In light of OD, not sharing one common understanding aiding to create alignment to change, but rather adhering to deviating and opposing understandings, stories (Brown & Humphreys 2003), is an act of resistance. Opposing understandings around change are thus disrupting the one, common understanding influencing work behavior and facilitating change.

### **3.3. Resistance needs to be avoided**

An OD approach to change promotes reaching a common understanding around change as a measure leading to resistance not being an issue (Bushe & Marshak 2009). When discussing strategic change and the process of “moving from intent to alignment to realization” Hardy (1996:85), presents

a model blending different perspectives on power “to influence strategy-making processes in ways that help prevent opposition to strategic change (ibid, 1996:86)”. Even though Hardy is not an researcher in the field of OD, the author’s writings on strategic change and what is written in OD share the assumption that resistance must be avoided. Either through an OD approach based on humanistic values avoiding resistance through shared values or through acknowledging and using power as in the case made by Hardy.

In summary, Organizational Development, OD, is based on humanistic, democratic and developmental values and promotes a view of reality as socially constructed. Change is therefore accomplished by shifting previous understandings to create a shared mind-set, a common understanding to create alignment and acceptance for change. Opposing understandings that would lead to actions congruent with these are disrupting the change process and are thus understood as resistance. As has been shown, Brown and Humphreys (2003) point to how several understandings in the form of opposing stories told are acts of resistance. OD shares the notion of other research fields concerned with change management, that resistance is to be actively avoided.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. OD at ustwo

In the following section excerpts from interviews with employees are highlighted to point to how their understandings of reality, what constitutes change and their part of it is influenced by an OD approach. The quotes are gathered without referring to the individual being quoted to point to a general understanding among the employees.

When discussing the firm undergoing change in terms of growth, one employee emphasized the need for a vision and principles that are able to guide people when the reach of the founders becomes limited:

“You need a framework that people... that can have a stand-alone information value for people.” (Samuels)

This is in line with the notion of values guiding actions, making change self-organized rather than imposed by managers or coaches, and is very much in accordance with an OD approach. Following the same notion another employee stated:

“Because when you coach you should not put too much of your own opinion in there because when I tell you what to do, you won’t do it. You have to find out yourself and you’ll own it and that’s the biggest part.” (Adler)

When talking about the purpose of a recent work shop one employee said:

“I think the thing with that was mostly to get a common understanding of some things because if we’re going to talk about team... it means something for you and something for you and something for me... “(Mellander)

During an interview one team coach responded as follows, when asked about what the team coaches were focusing on at the moment:

“...on more of an overall level we’re working on everybody understanding the importance of working in teams...”

And continues:

“It’s very much to get to a place where it’s not talk, it’s do...”

(Mellander)

The statements above indicate a view of reality where multiple understandings are prevalent, a social constructivist OD view. Inferring from that, and team coaches as change agents understand their part in this as creating a common thread connecting these understandings. This can be explained by the OD view on change agents as someone who makes sense of social reality and redirects it.



## 4.2. The two stories told

Prevalent in both stories is the use of the word “corporate”, still it is never defined by the employees. However, we understand this term to include hierarchy, structures, titles, strategy and words that are in general linked to large corporations in a business world discourse. According to our understanding the term is not used in order to provide a specific description of what is corporate or not, rather it entails another purpose for the employees. Similar to what Alvesson (2003) refers to as a cultural script.

## 4.3. “Corporate is needed”

“I think we need to get a little bit more structure into the organization...” (*Woxneryd*)

The employees at ustwo tell the story of growth. The company has been expanding on a global level, opening new studios and more are said to open in the near future, maybe in Shanghai, San Francisco or in Sydney. The Malmö office is attracting new clients and then more designers, developers and coaches will follow. Growth is argued to be the main factor for why change is needed at ustwo, change in terms of implementing structures. This to clarify roles and responsibilities as well as provide the company with an overall direction. In sum this is a common understanding, a story of how structures, something that can be viewed as corporate, is needed at ustwo. We label this story “Corporate is needed”.

### 4.3.1. Growth is creating a need for change

“... since it’s been no structure and then growing and then all of a sudden there’s a need for structure and find a way to do that...”  
(Mellander)

“I think it’s a growth thing...” (Samuels)

“When you grow to a size when that doesn’t work and that’s something ‘but it worked before’ yes, but now we’re fifty and people

don't see each other as much, there's different rooms and different... so it's yeah getting to more of a yeah, structure... And all the things that is not needed if you are four people but now fifty; it was needed to have.” (Mellander)

“Oh shit, we're like 200 people I think we need to get a little bit more structure into the organization, a little bit clearer vision, clearer aim... ' Clearer strategies to move forward... ” (Woxneryd)

#### **4.3.2. Structures to clarify responsibilities**

”If it is just us in a chat making decisions then it is... And then people are also not accountable in any way.” (Mellander)

“For me there was a clear reason why we set it up. We had like very little structure before, decisions were taken without anyone really knowing who took them and why. Ustwo has been afraid and it has always been a very very flat organization and then you have to have people helping out with responsibility and if people don't then everything falls.” (Gedin)

#### **4.3.3. Structures to clarify roles**

”But suddenly I think, everyone started to realize, I mean decisions are taken and we need to do it in a structured way and then when people have questions they know where to go.” (Gedin)

”So I mean there's also how we do things but yes we need structure to move on because otherwise it would be a bit, what do you say, naive to say like “everybody can do everything.” (Mellander)

“...it went really well up until all of a sudden now we're so big that without leadership, without that, we started getting a lot of people being not fully aware of who, ‘what am I supposed to do?’ ‘What are you supposed to do?’” (Samuels)

#### 4.3.4. Structures to provide direction

“And with this, sort of, a bit more zooming out and steering the whole ship comes more structure...” (Woxneryd)

“That’s fine up until a certain size and that size is... is when you as a founder, a cultural icon, when you don’t have a reach when you don’t have time or reach to talk to everyone and to get them into the culture, get them into the community. When that starts happening then all of a sudden you do need the structure, you do need principles, you do need a vision. You need a framework that people, that can have a stand-alone information value for people.”  
(Samuels)

From an OD perspective on change, “Corporate is needed” can be viewed as the one common understanding enabling change. Employees at ustwo understand how growth is creating a need for structures and from this follows an alignment to and acceptance for change in terms of implementing such structures.

#### **4.4. “Corporate is bad”**

“You follow a structure to give someone feedback, it can feel very much like ‘Oh, what is this corporate bullshit?’” (Woxneryd)

Another common understanding among employees at ustwo is constructed in the story of how structures often are seen as being “corporate” and how in turn corporate is perceived as bad. In this there is a notion of how ustwo is not part of being corporate. We label this story “Corporate is bad”.

##### **4.4.1. A lot of things are corporate**

“Oh no management yuck, strategy yuck’ anything that reminds them of big 5 corporate douche management consultants they would shun, you know with garlic around the necks.” (Samuels)

“And ustwo has always been afraid about having leaders or managers because then you start having a hierarchy and that’s been a very bad corporate thing.” (Gedin)

“...so it’s yeah getting to more of a yeah, structure which in a company like this can be far off for a lot of people because they connect that to corporate...”

”But I mean at least as I understood it there was like leadership and management was kind of swear words, they were not used and they were bad.” (Mellander)

##### **4.4.2. Others are corporate**

Two employees describe their former employers as corporate organizations and contrast that to ustwo.

”I got fed up with the big organization and politics so I moved here.” (Gedin)

“I mean it’s nice to, I mean, I came from a big corporate company which had about 400 employees... So it was really nice to come here with 15-20 people because they were your friends, not just your colleagues, people you can hang out with.” (Persson)

In describing ustwo an employee differentiates between being a community and being a company, the later which can be seen as corporate.

”The reason I use community is because this place is more community than it actually is a company, it is a community that happens to make money.” (Samuels)

An employee explains how the values of ustwo are provoking and unusual to some. This can be understood as pointing to how other more corporate organizations do not share these values.

“But also it’s, I mean, the world we live in, to sort of bring in a human, a human perspective and sort of the values that we sort of actually care, that’s almost provoking for some... So it is important but it’s so, so unusual. You should just be professional, not get too much emotions out and that’s how we’re trained...” (Mellander)

An employee points to how other companies, in this case an advertising agency that could be perceived as being similar to ustwo still is different due to hierarchy, something that is connected to the notion of being corporate.

“And people do stand behind each other, there’s very like, if you would walk into like an advertising agency in Malmö somewhere you have all this, there’s a competition of the roles and there’s prestige and like... there’s very little of that here and that’s really nice. That adds a very relaxed sort of family atmosphere to this studio.” (Woxneryd)

Not mentioning specifically where, an employee is implicitly referring to others having board members, which can be understood as corporate.

“Board members isn’t just sitting somewhere and making all the decisions.” (Persson)

#### **4.5. Deadlock at ustwo?**

Employees at ustwo share not only one but two common understandings, two stories circulate among the people working at the Malmö studio: “Corporate is needed” and “Corporate is bad”. Both stories point to how structures, titles and other features of organizations are understood as being “corporate”, however in the story presented first it is accompanied by a positive notion and in the second a negative.

The first story can be seen as being in line with the OD approach to change that is prevalent at the firm. In order for ustwo to remain successful and continuously grow structures are needed and employees are agreeing on this. Considering the second story of corporate is bad, structures that are agreed upon as necessary in the first story, could very well be seen as unwanted. “Corporate is bad” is clearly opposing the common understanding prevailed in the storyline of “Corporate is needed”. Following the logic of OD an opposing understanding is resistance. The rhetorical question whether this is the case at ustwo if therefore raised. Is the opposing story a sign of resistance disrupting the change process at ustwo?

## **4.6. Change at ustwo is a positive thing**

The implementation of structures, the change, has been well received at ustwo. Employees are positive towards the change. There is also a notion of change being scary and creating uncertainty. It is acknowledged that change could lead to resistance but the common understanding is that it has not done so. Employees of ustwo perceive change as happening, however what is seen as the essence of ustwo is preserved.

### **4.6.1. Change is positive**

“It’s going quite good considering what a big transition it is and it’s kind of influencing everyone. And yes, I think it is going good, it is positive.” (Martyn)

“Those quite formal processes. But that we’ve been doing for a while now and now that is just, it felt like training but now it doesn’t feel like training anymore now it just feel like being real, you know.” (Woxneryd)

“I see change within the studio. I mean people, I would say people are happier and more open...” (Gedin)

“I think growth for me is really exciting because what it does, it creates opportunities for people in the family.” (Woxneryd)

### **4.6.2. Change is positive but scary**

“And I was very hesitant and afraid of starting change and I didn’t know how people were reacting. But I remember one of my first meetings where I just did a small small tweak. And one of the guys he almost got into tears because he was so relieved of the new way of doing things because the previous way had been pressuring him tremendously. And that was my first, ok people here are happy about change.” (Gedin)

“It’s been pretty eye-opening experience, for me it’s like a new world opening up which is amazing but also quite scary.”  
(Woxneryd)

“A new strategy coming in, a new vision... hard to find out where you fit in that.” (Marques)

#### **4.6.3. Change could create resistance**

“Almost everyone is really open minded to try out new things so I know we’re working in a pretty delicate spot because I know it could be a lot of resistance but it’s not and I think that is because is so much, it is in the culture to sort of try new things.” (Adler)

“I mean there were people even like a couple of month ago ‘ok, finally I start to see the purpose’ and the coaches came last year in June, so it took them half a year to see yes they actually do create value and there is some sort of positive change not only in the team but also in the studio wide.” (Martyn)

“But I think the gains are so much kind of, balanced that out so well so everyone got positive about it...” (Marques)

#### **4.6.4. Change has not changed ustwo**

“I think that’s something we’ve been working at for the last two years and it’s a big change for us. But it hasn’t affected the culture, it has more affected the way we do things. So I feel like we’re constantly changing but we’re keeping the spirit of ustwo.”  
(Persson)

“I’m not so worried about the... that sort of just because of growth we lose focus on culture and stuff, that will never happen because it is sort of the company, the DNA is the people, is the culture.”  
(Woxneryd)

The two opposing stories at ustwo are from an OD approach curious. The story of "Corporate is needed" is creating acceptance towards the change,



employees understand the change of implementing structures to clarify roles, responsibilities and provide an overall direction as needed and clearly positive. There is a common understanding guiding actions around implementing change. The story that is simultaneously told of how structures being corporate, and others being corporate organizations and therefore bad is opposing the positive understanding around change. Still, resistance is left to be found at ustwo. From an OD perspective the story of “Corporate is bad” remains unexplained, if it is not about resistance then what is it about?

#### **4.7. Knowledge-intensive firms and ambiguity**

A topic receiving a large amount of attention from scholars and media is knowledge-intensive work and knowledge-intensive firms (KIF). Alvesson (2004:38) lists several characteristics common among KIFs:

- the centrality of intellectual and symbolic skills in work, motivating the term “knowledge work”;
- that self-organization and dispersed authority are typically salient;
- a tendency to downplay bureaucracy in favor of ad hoc organizational forms;
- a high level of uncertainty and problem-awareness in team-work calling for extensive communication for coordination and problem-solving;
- that in professional service work client services need to be client-centered and situationally fine-tuned;
- complex problems and solutions involving considerable elements of intangibility calling for subjective and uncertain quality assessment;
- that the expert position (or claim to or belief in such a position) creates a particular power asymmetry between professional firm and client (often favoring the professional over the client).

Central in a knowledge intensive setting is ambiguity. The characteristic above implies that a KIF does not have the usual frameworks of hierarchy, clear-cut work assignments and tangible measurements of results and quality leading to a high level of ambiguity.

#### 4.8. Identity and change

In the context of researching KIFs there is a surge of interest in considering socio-psychological insights of theory on individual and organizational identity (Haslam 2003). Often identity is referred to as being a matter of characteristics, consisting of clearly identifiable traits that do not change. However, in line with Alvesson (2004) we argue that identity should rather be seen as constantly changing, aiming for temporarily forms of coherence. Coherence thereby refers to stability that is received in an effort of connecting and rearranging what one experiences to form a stable sense of self. Identity is not fixed but rather an open question of '*Who am I?*'. At the same time it is contrasted from a role or the notion of self, as "it is not a reflection of a psychological or social 'objective reality'. Identity is how individuals or groups of people understand and define themselves." (ibid. 2004:190). From this perspective, one can talk about individual identity work as representing a continuous process influenced and also threatened by certain events with the ultimate aim to reach and secure stability (Willmott & Alvesson 2002: 625). Acknowledging a process perspective on identity we can refer to identity as consisting of different parts being arranged and rearranged in a patchwork. Basis to this are not only own perceptions, thoughts and behavior but also how one relates and positions herself to others.

Stemming from the notion of intergroup relations and self-enhancement motivation it is said that people routinely categorize themselves in groups providing ground to their social identity (Alvesson, 2004; Hogg, 2001). Especially in the context of contemporary organizations identity work with the aim to achieve coherence is closely connected to and dependent on social relations, which in turn is necessary for coping with work tasks and social interactions (Alvesson 1994; Alvesson and Willmott 2002). The following text concerning an organizational context undergoing change is therefore positioned towards highlighting social identities. According to theory on social identification it refers to a perception of oneness with a group, this per-

ception is facilitated by factors of group formation such as the distinctiveness and prestige of the group and the salience of outgroups (Ashforth & Mael 1989:20). Important to note is that one might perceive oneness with a group category without necessarily internalize all or even most of the values and norms of said group. However, identification with a group could serve as a point of departure for thinking and relating (Alvesson 2004:191).

Identity from a managerial perspective within KIFs becomes highly relevant considering that conventional measures of control of behavior and results are ruled out due to complexity in work tasks and products. The ambiguous nature of KIFs also calls for considerable efforts to secure a sense of a coherent self. Identity within KIFs is thus very much concerned with control and support. Management of identities as relating to control is described as: "Trying to control how people see themselves is one way of safeguarding what are deemed to be suitable priorities and efforts." (Alvesson 2004:207). In a similar manner, Alvesson and Willmott have shown the importance of identity regulation for processes of organizational control being closely connected to identity-work and self-identity. According to them, being affected by greater flexibility and self-organization at the workplace leads to a generally greater need of identity regulation to be considered in forms of normative control (2002: 622).

At the same time, negative effects stemming from a high level of ambiguity within KIFs, such as low self-confidence and frustration due to not being able to measure outcomes and being highly dependent on arbitrary evaluations and opinions from others, e.g. clients, make identity regulation in the form of support motivated. Separate from identity management as control, identity regulation is focused on providing positive support contrasted to an aim of creating the right work orientation leading to desirable actions. Identity as support is connected to corporate identity as "constructions of what the company stands for and in what respects it is more or less unique (Alvesson 2004:209)". These constructions compensate for uncertainties from

fragmented work tasks and work experiences. In the following text we will equate corporate identity with social identification.

Coupled with KIFs as being characterized by ambiguity and making them a setting for identity work. Identity work is also said to be intensified by transitions such as organizational change (Alvesson 2003). Eilam and Shamir (2005) discuss identities related to organizational change and emphasize individual's strive for a sense of coherence and continuous self during such processes. Willmott and Worthington (2001) add to the understanding of resistance in situations of change by arguing that resistance stems from individuals who interpret the change as threatening to their sense of self. Resistance is therefore not so much about being opposed what is being implemented or adjusted in an organization per se, it is about objecting to a perceived threat to one's identity. If change is considered to be aligned with identity change is accepted or even promoted (Eilam & Shamir 2005).

#### **4.9. Opposing stories and no resistance?**

Change is understood by the employees to be a successful venture. From an OD perspective this would be ascribed to the fact that there is a common understanding of the change guiding the employees in the transition. Agreement has been reached around growth as a factor making structures needed at ustwo. Employees happily align themselves to new practices for conducting meetings, welcome more visible leadership and look forward to a new business model being presented. However, there is a hunch of change being a big undertaking and at times scary. Opposing to a common understanding of needing structures is a story of how structures are bad and something distancing ustwo from other companies. Brown and Humphreys' (2003) finding of two contradictory stories in a situation of change explains the story of tragedy told by subordinates as resistance. At ustwo resistance is understood to be absent. Furthermore, the authors see the subordinate's story as resistance drawing on their social identity. At ustwo the stories are

told by all employees: managing director, team coaches, designers, HR personnel and developers. Two opposing stories at ustwo cannot be explained by viewing one of them as resistance and the mere fact that there are simultaneously two stories being told goes against the OD-key to successful change of having one common understanding.

#### **4.10. “Corporate is bad” as a social identity**

Similarly to how Brown and Humphrey (2003) explain how a story told during change stems from social identity, SIT has an explanatory value at ustwo. The authors point to how a notion of us (subordinates) and them (superiors) is enhanced by the differing stories told. However, at ustwo “them”, the outgroups, are found externally. A dominant feature of “Corporate is bad” suggests how others are dedicating themselves to structures or how former employers were corporate firms.

“And people do stand behind each other, there’s very like, if you would walk into like an advertising agency in Malmö somewhere you have all this, there’s a competition of the roles and there’s prestige and like... there’s very little of that here and that’s really nice. That adds a very relaxed sort of family atmosphere to this studio.” (Woxneryd)

According to SIT the salience of outgroups facilitates the identification with the group that is being related to others, as it makes the preferred group more distinctive. The quote depicts another KIF placed in the same region as ustwo, factors that would lead the listener to perceive it as similar to each other, but a point is made that despite this ustwo is different. As ustwo does not refrain to hierarchy, something that is “corporate”, competition is replaced by a “family atmosphere”.

The distinctiveness of ustwo is in pointing to outgroups formed by constructing what ustwo is not rather than declaring what ustwo is. Using the term alterity, indicating what outgroups are like answers the question “Who am

I unlike?” (Czarniawska, 2002). “Corporate is bad” constructs ustwo as unlike others that are corporate thus making ustwo not. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) refer to the same phenomena using the term “anti-identity” and explain it as “an active, negative separation between one’s identity and something else”. In terms of alterity and anti-identity the following quote is stating that ustwo is not having board members separately making decisions, ustwo does not have centralized decision-making.

“Board members isn’t just sitting somewhere and making all the decisions.” (Persson)

Based on SIT and alterity the story of “Corporate is bad” can be seen as facilitating the identification of employees with the social category that is ustwo. This being part of intense identity work fueled by change. When discussing the shift from project managers to team coaches and their work one employee states:

“It’s been a pretty eye-opening experience, for me it’s like a new world opening up which is amazing but also quite scary.”  
(Woxneryd)

Change is admittedly scary for the employee. Another employee that prevails an otherwise positive image of change during the interview notes:

“A new strategy coming in, a new vision... hard to find out where you fit in that” (Marques)

Change is said to increase the pressure on employees identity work (Alvesson 2003) and coupled with the ambiguity of ustwo being a KIF this puts pressure on the employees’ identities. Something that can be understood in the quotes above. As the story of “Corporate is bad” cannot be understood as resistance, rather as part of identity work the apparent contradictory elements of the story to change being implemented is mitigated. Change that is perceived to threaten the identity of organizational members is said

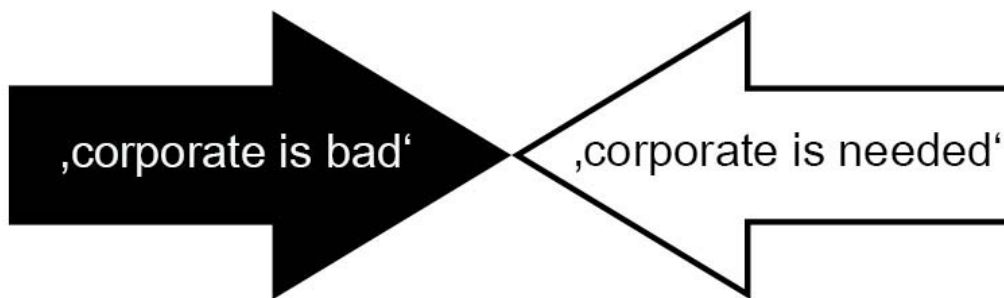
to be resisted and obstructed (Eilam & Shamir 2005). On first sight the social identity of *ustwo* constructed in the story “Corporate is bad” is contradictory to the implementation of structures. However, not pointing specifically to what “corporate” is the story does not lead to resistance but to strengthen the notion, the essence, of *ustwo* not being corporate. The story serves to preserve a valued sense of not being corporate as part of the social identity during a time where there is a threat put on this claim. Implementing change could be perceived as becoming more corporate but “something corporate is bad” provides a notion of stability to the social identity.

“I think that’s something we’ve been working at for the last two years and it’s a big change for us. But it hasn’t affected the culture, it has more affected the way we do things. So I feel like we’re constantly changing but we’re keeping the spirit of *ustwo*.”  
(Persson)

From an identity theory perspective “Corporate is bad” can be seen as identity management in the form of support, providing a positive sense of selves. It is what is understood as setting the firm apart from others and making it unique. “Others are corporate but *ustwo* is clearly not” is the mantra throughout conducted interviews. This social identity serves as a safe harbour when change is inflicting structures and moving the company closer to things they have never been before, that is corporate. On the other hand the rather straightforward story of “corporate is needed” is more aligned with the approach of OD, the one, common understanding around change. This can be seen as identity regulation in the form of control, guiding actions in desirable directions to enable change.

#### 4.11. A new mental picture - The Yin and the Yang

The two stories serving the purpose of identity management of control and support still leave the question of how they can co-exist. The picture below depicting two arrows colliding can be seen as the current mental model of resistance in OD. Two opposing stories would naturally collide, “Corporate is bad” would be challenging the common understanding of “Corporate is needed” and disrupt the change process. Accepting this understanding of the opposing story would lead to efforts focused on reducing and counteract the resistance.



*Image 1: Opposing stories from an OD perspective*

We introduce the symbol of yin and yang as a way of mentally picturing the interplay between two different and opposing stories. According to yin and yang, coherence is only reached if one thing is complemented by its polar opposite. Everything that exists needs to be balanced in a constant effort to reach harmony. While harmony is only reached if both parts are present one cannot exist without the other.

The white area in the symbol represents Yang, it holds the quality of activity and when yin and yang is applied to medicine, yang represents the head of a body. Yin, the black area of the symbol is passive, stands for rest and represents the body of a human being. In relation to ustwo the relationship



between the two stories can be seen as “corporate is needed” fitting the description of Yang and “corporate is bad” Yin.



*Image 2 Opposing stories from an identity management perspective*

Yang, “Corporate is needed” is the head and does the thinking. Ustwo is a growing company, it has outgrown its previous, informal ways of dealing with work. Structures are needed and in this it makes perfect sense, it follows the logic of the head. “Corporate is needed” as Yang contains activity as the story drives change at ustwo through identity management as control.

Yin, “Corporate is bad” is the passive at ustwo, the story has its roots in the early years of the company, the days of being a start-up, and it is the social identity where employees want to rest and find security when change arises. Yin is the body and “Corporate is bad” is the body seen to constitute what makes ustwo. The story as identity management preserves and support.

”I think it’s getting the right level of structure in place. For me, it’s very easy to overdo it. And there’s also a very high risk when you grow not to do it enough.” (Woxneryd)

In sum, the symbol of yin and yang provides an understanding of how identity management in the form of control through one story can co-exist with a contradictory story serving as identity support during change. The model provides an understanding of how control and support complete each other. If only “Corporate is needed” was preached at the firm, the hunch of how change is scary could take over and lead to resistance. With stabilizing this notion with “Corporate is bad” the fear of change is mitigated through preserving and maintaining the social identity. They complete each other through driving change through control and avoiding resistance through support. The notion of the balance between the two stories at *ustwo* – the balance between yin and yang is seen in the quote above.

## 5. Result

Two opposing stories in a change process can be understood as identity management concerning control guiding actions in line with change and support preserving identity to avoid resistance. Together control and support in the shape of the stories “Corporate is needed” and “Corporate is bad” enable change.

The case study at ustwo offered insights to an OD change process where two stories circulated amongst employees related to change. The stories are opposing each other and would in an OD logic and considering Brown and Humphreys’ study be a sign of resistance. “Corporate is bad” would be contradicting the story working for change, “Corporate is needed”. Resistance is not understood by the employees to be present, even though a hunch of change being scary appeared in the empirical material.

“Corporate is bad” is understood through a perspective of SIT, enabling the employees at ustwo to point to outgroups, others being corporate and facilitate the identification with the social identity of ustwo. Therefore the story is not to be viewed as resistance rather it is explained as preserving social identity, due to change that is perceived as threatening to identity would be counter-acted and resisted. The story is understood as identity support.

“Corporate is needed” follows an OD approach of creating understanding of change, it represents a story of common sense in terms of growth causally leading to a need for structures and this is accepted by the employees. The story guides actions through a common understanding driving change. The story is understood as control.

The co-existence of the two opposing stories is explained with the mental model of yin and yang, two opposing sides completing each other and there-

fore creating harmony. This is contrasted with the mental model represented in an OD approach where opposing stories would mean that one is resistance and must be counter-acted for change to succeed.

## 6. Conclusion

As discussed previously in the text, Brown & Humphrey's understanding of opposing stories as resistance stemming from the social identity of a group is challenged. We too follow the line of explanation drawing on SIT to describe the story of "Corporate is bad" in pointing to how it is enforcing the social identity of *ustwo*. The Social identity at *ustwo* is understood as encompassing all employees rather than creating internal group formations between e.g. superiors and subordinates. Separate from Brown & Humphrey we understand the story as identity management in the form of support, this as opposed to Brown & Humphrey's understanding of the story as resistance.

Considering the view on resistance dominant in the field of OD our conclusion provides an alternative perspective on resistance contributing to the approach. The field of research does not have an explanation for what opposing stories in a change process could entail other than labelling it resistance. In this aspect the perspective of the field on resistance is one-sided. We argue that in taking the perspective of identity in relation to change we can add to the field of OD. However, our contribution goes deeper than simply implying that what OD point to as resistance, we suggest is identity management as support. That would make our contribution equally one-dimensional. Rather we argue that the essence of the contribution lies in the acknowledgment of viewing a phenomena from different perspectives.

Due to the widespread application of OD practices in organizations facing change we argue that a shift in the perception of resistance is a game-changer. Considering the measures taken in attempt to reduce or even extinguish what is seen as resistance we argue that our contribution has substantial value for organizations. Team building conferences, hiring well-paid consultants and replacing personnel viewed as resisters are among other things examples of actions to actively remove resistance. We suggest

that an alternative understanding of resistance may spare time, effort and money spent on reducing the same.

Our findings support a call for the field of OD to broaden its perspective on what is to be seen as resistance. At ustwo two opposing stories complemented each other, as depicted in the symbol of Yin and Yang, leading to the avoidance of counteracts directed at change. Resistance, from an OD perspective, is supported by our findings to instead be seen as something producing change. However, as identity management plays an important role in KIFs connected to the high level of ambiguity characterizing their form of organization, resistance explained as identity control and support might have less explanatory value to resistance in other organizations. Based on our view of reality as socially constructed we argue that our result is highly connected to the specific context of ustwo and encourage further research to create a deeper understanding of what a phenomena drawing on OD and labelled as resistance might entail.

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