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All on board? Exploring metaphors and the symbolic management of change

A qualitative case study in a large Swedish bank

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Abstract

- Title:** All on board? Metaphors and the symbolic management of of change: A qualitative case study in a large Swedish bank
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- Keywords:** Strategic change, Symbolic management, Sensemaking, Change recipient sensemaking, Inter-recipient sensemaking, Sensegiving, Sensebreaking, Metaphor, Digitization, Banking
- Purpose:** To develop a better understanding of the discursive, cognitive and emotional experience of symbolic management attempts of strategic change and its enactment in the organizational practice from both a managerial and a non-managerial perspective.
- Methodology/method:** An explorative, ethnographically-inspired qualitative case study in a single organization. The empirical material was constructed from interviews, participant observations and document studies. Three levels of analysis: text, meaning, and practice.
- Theoretical framework:** Firstly, theory on strategic management, change management and symbolism provided the theoretical backdrop of the study. Secondly, the metatheoretical framework was sensemaking (and sensegiving). Thirdly, the principal theoretical framework was managerial metaphors in the symbolic management of change. Metaphors were used both as a theoretical lens to make sense of social phenomena in organizations and studied as an empirical phenomenon in itself.
- Empirical material:** The case study organization was Swedbank, a Swedish bank. The empirical focus was threefold (three hierarchical levels of the organization): sensemaking and sensegiving practices, with particular reference to a journey metaphor and a boat metaphor, among top management, middle management, and co-workers.
- Conclusion(s):** Managerial metaphors in the symbolic management of change were constructed, made sense of and enacted in different ways along different hierarchical levels of the organization. However, despite misalignments between how managers and co-workers theorized the managerial metaphors in the discourse of change, its meanings and the emotions evoked, the (local) organization performed par excellence. Therefore, we raised questions about the possibility for and the instrumental value of managing the sensemaking of others to create systems of shared vocabularies, meanings and emotions in change work. We also questioned if it always is possible to act on such sharedness. Along these lines, we called for a reflexive approach to metaphor in change work.

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Thirdly, and lastly, we would like to thank ourselves.

And, dear reader, welcome on board!

Oskar Forslund and Andreas Jansson

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1. Introduction

In this first chapter, we outline the empirical and theoretical canvas of the study along with constructing a research problem and presenting the purpose, aims and research questions.

1.1 Background

Along (meta)narratives of hyper-competition (due to globalization), the knowledge economy and technological innovations, scholars and practitioners have embarked on how society and organization of work are in transformation and flux (cf. Alvesson, 2013a; Paulsen, 2014). The traditional banking industry is no exception. As regulations enacted in the post-financial crisis context along with disruptive technology, increased competition, global instability and shifts in customer and public expectations, are said by industry experts to call for the banking industry to radically (re)imagine their business models to survive and capitalize in the era of digitization (e.g. Deloitte, 2018; EY, 2013; KPMG, 2017; McKinsey, 2016a; PwC, 2015; The Economist, 2017). The banking industry (from now on, delimited to a Swedish context) is reporting to have answered the call in full force (e.g. Danske Bank, 2018; Handelsbanken, 2018; Länsförsäkringar, 2018; Nordea, 2018; SEB, 2018a, Swedbank, 2018a).

The management of change is, however, said to be far from unproblematic (e.g. Beer, Eisenstat & Spector, 1990; Burnes, 2011; Rafferty, Jimmieson & Armenakis, 2013). This, it is sometimes argued, due to that organizational life in general (e.g. Brunsson, 1989; Jackall, 1988; March & Olsen, 1976) and change in particular (e.g. Hardy, 1996; Helms Mills, 2003; Meyerson & Martin, 1987) involves uncertainties, complexities, ambiguities, tensions and paradoxes in need of being addressed. And, for the brave, to be ‘managed’.

To manage strategic change in organizations is said to be especially tricky and anxiety-provoking (e.g. Heracleous, 2003). This because a change at a strategic level is said to bring about a need of – if possible and/or ethically justifiable (e.g. Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003; Willmott, 1993) – substantive alteration in the social construction of organizational reality (e.g. Bate, 1995; Hatch, 1993; Schein, 2010). Thus, to realize strategic intent, change agents are often encouraged to take the cultural and symbolic dimensions of organizations seriously (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Morgan, Frost & Pondy, 1983; Peters, 1978).

This reorientation in the management of strategic change in organizations, as part of a general shift in organization and management studies sometimes referred to as the ‘symbolic

turn' (cf. Alvesson, 1990; Cooper, 1989), is said to include the managerial manipulation of meaning through symbolic language in acts of communication (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, 1978; Reed, 1984; Siehl & Martin, 1984; Smircich, 1983a). In the literature on management of strategic change, such managerial influencing attempts are often referred to as sensegiving (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). A concept that may be argued to be closely related to the management of meaning (cf. Smircich & Morgan, 1982), imaginization (cf. Morgan, 1993), framing (cf. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), managing understanding (cf. Sandberg & Targama, 2007), leadership (cf. Alvesson & Blom & Sveningsson, 2017), and the interpreter image of the change agent suggested by Palmer, Dunford and Buchanan (2017).

In seminal texts on strategic management (e.g. Barney, 1991; Porter, 1980) and change management (e.g. Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 1996; Peters & Waterman, 1982), the top managers – and/or management consultants (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990; Tisdall, 1982) – are, as a rule, positioned as the key strategic and cultural change players (e.g. 'meaning-makers', Conger, 1991). However, there is a growing body of research that embarks on the central role middle- and lower-level managers play for realizing strategic change (cf. Kanter, 1982; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990).

For example, Rouleau (2005) shows how middle managers interpret and 'sell' change to both internal and external stakeholders of the organization. Balogun (2003) labels middle managers as change intermediaries – role modeling, giving sense and 'managing resistance' in times of change. And McDermott, Fitzgerald and Buchanan (2013) illustrate how middle managers translate top-down directives to fit local conditions of the organization.

1.2 Sensemaking and sensegiving

Taken together, to sum up the main points in the previous subchapter, the traditional banking industry is said to be in a state of transformation and flux. And the significance of taking the symbolic dimensions of organizations seriously when 'managing' such strategic change is widely recognized in the field of organization and management studies. Furthermore, there seem to be plausible grounds for assuming that middle- and lower-level managers have a key role to play in the process of implementing strategic change initiatives in organizations.

To this, there is an extensive body of literature using a sensemaking (and sensegiving) lens to explore and make sense of organizational life in general (e.g. Weick, 1995) and the

management of meanings in change work in particular (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As echoed in the following quote by Helms Mills (2003, p.35):

“At the organizational level, sensemaking can offer an explanation for understanding the management of change, while at the individual level it serves up an explanation for understanding the management of meaning.”

Still, we argue, there is a knowledge gap and an underrepresentation of some voices in the field. However, being reflective enough to acknowledge that some gaps are perhaps best left unexplored (cf. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011), we argue that there are opportunities to contribute with something interesting and relevant. To outline the rationale for this study, a quote by Palmer, Dunford and Buchanan (2017, p.4) may help to clarify our intention:

“The images that we hold about the way in which change should be managed, and the role of change agents, affect how we approach change and the outcomes we think are possible.”

In other words, the images that managers – and others – hold about change and their roles as change agents (sensemaking) frame the way in which they engage in attempts of influencing the sensemaking of others (sensegiving). Thus, to develop a better understanding of strategic change processes in organizations, it is of interest to put the managers’ images-in-use under the loupe. To explore the underexplored sense the senders (i.e. managers) make of their sensegiving attempts (for one exception, e.g. Morgan, 2001). In the words of Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005, p.416):

“Yet to be examined is the effect of effort at sensegiving on the sensemakers. [...] Sensegiving may affect the [managerial] sensemaker as well as the target.”

Further, if adopting an ambiguity-centred view on life in organizations (cf. Martin & Meyerson, 1988), it cannot be taken for granted that the ‘change recipient sensemaking’ (cf. Balogun & Johnson, 2005), and/or the sensemaking of the ‘receiving end’ (cf. Bartunek et al. 2006), make the same sense of the sensegiving attempts as the senders (cf. Bartunek et al. 1999). In contrast to the ‘sender-centric view’ dominating the literature (cf. Corvellec & Risberg, 2007). Therefore, by the same token as above, we find it to be of interest to explore the sensemaking of middle managers (as both receivers and senders) and the underexplored sense, if any, the co-workers (as end receivers) make of managerial sensegiving attempts in the context of strategic change (for three exceptions in terms of the latter category, Bartunek et al. 2006; Sonenshein, 2010; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012).

This while, in tandem, being attentive to, among other things, a reciprocal direction of influence along (formal) vertical levels of the organization (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and negotiations of meanings along both formal and informal lateral levels of the organization (e.g. ‘inter-recipient sensemaking’, Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Maitlis, 2005), and beyond the boundaries of the organization itself (e.g. Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). And, in addition, following Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017, p.149), to uncouple the common a priori coupling of ‘the intention, the act and the outcome’. This in an attempt to make the symbolic management of strategic change a little less familiar (or more lifelike, if you will).

1.3 Narrative and metaphor

Two sensegiving devices that, in the wake of the ‘linguistic turn’ (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a) in organization and management studies, have received significant scholarly interest in the recent decades and which are argued to be particularly powerful when attempting to manage the hearts and minds of others, are narratives and metaphors (e.g. Dunford & Jones, 2000; Gioia et al. 1994; Morgan, 1988; Oswick & Grant, 1996a; Pondy, 1983; Weick, 1995). As captured by the words of Sonenshein (2010, p.480):

“[Narrative is a] discursive construction that actors use as a tool to shape their understanding (sensemaking), as a tool to influence others’ understanding (sensegiving), and as an outcome of the collective construction of meaning.”

A logic that seems to apply to metaphors as well. In the words of Hill and Levenhagen:

“It is suggested that [e.g. managers] make extensive use of metaphors both in developing a vision or mental model of their environments (sensemaking) and articulating that vision to others (sensegiving). (1995, p.1058)

By the same token, Marshak (1993a, p.45) and other more practitioner-oriented, prescriptive literature (e.g. Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; Burke, 1992; Cleary & Packard, 1992) suggest that ‘managing the [managerial] metaphors of change become a critical competency for [...] change agents’. In other words, managerial narratives and metaphors seem to matter. And are, in an organizational context, by no means understudied (e.g. Grant & Oswick, 1996).

However, and as hinted in the previous subchapter, we argue, some questions are still unanswered and/or deserve further unpacking. And some voices are often left unheard (or put on mute). For example, when outlining avenues for research in a study on language in organizations from a symbolic interactionist stance, Cossette (1998, p.1368) suggested:

“How do employees interpret these [managerial] acts of language? [...] Metaphor [...] What meanings does the hearer ascribe to the speaker’s metaphors? Do the people exposed to the metaphors associate them with the ideas that the people using them want to convey?”

These questions are interesting. Both in terms of opening up for the possibility of different readings of the (polysemic?) meaning of a specific managerial metaphor and to request that the frequently ignored receiving end should be part of the (change) conversation (above and beyond the managerialist discourse of ‘resistance to change’, Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008). And some scholars working in a post-positivist paradigm of research have answered the call.

For example, regarding the first point raised previously, Greenberg (1995) suggested that a top managerial analogy constrained the sensemaking of middle managers – prompted conflict and confusion, rather than guidance and direction. Morgan (2001) argued that a top managerial metaphor of change suppressed alternative interpretations and voices in a middle management team. Huzzard, Hellström and Lifvergren (2014) illustrated how a managerial metaphor was theorized differently in discourse among different middle managers.

And if including the voices of the receiving end (i.e. non-managers), which seldom is done, the ‘picture’ may be argued to become more fragmented and ambiguous. For example, when studying a top-down strategic change implementation, Sonenshein (2010) illustrated how the receiving end embellished the managerial narratives as efforts to resist, champion and/or accept the change. Further, in sharp contrast to the received ‘truths’ in the literature on change management, he argued that strategic ambiguity, rather than clarity, was a virtue in change work (cf. ‘visionary ambiguity’, Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012).

Furthermore, others have also questioned the virtue of and/or the possibility for shared meanings (e.g. Weick, 1995). And the possibility for managing the meanings of metaphor in the eyes of others at managerial will rooted in an instrumental, means-end logic (e.g. Koch & Deetz, 1981; Sinclair, 1994). As such ‘sharedness’ may, for example, be a power play of discourse and political action (e.g. Dawson & Buchanan, 2005; Mumby, 2005). In addition, if understood in its sociomaterial context (cf. Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) in which it is said to come about, we question if it is always possible (or ethical) to act on such understanding? And, we wonder, how much help is a sexy signifier in an imperfect organizational reality?

In other words, somewhat (un)surprisingly, the ‘giving’ of sense and the ‘taking’ of sense is neither unproblematic nor an objective, value-neutral enterprise (e.g. Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). But, we argue, it is often approached as if it would involve a ‘transaction’

among equals. And that the sense exists independent of, and external to, the social interaction in which it comes about. Furthermore, in the context of managerial metaphors of change, in the words of Smollan (2014, p.795), ‘the emotional dimensions of metaphors are frequently overlooked’ (for two exceptions, e.g. Burke, 2008; Vince & Broussine, 1996). A dimension that we, in addition to its discursive and cognitive dimensions, aim to take seriously. After the next subchapter, in which we briefly put our conversation in its empirical context, we outline the purpose, the research questions and the aims of the study.

1.4 Metaphor and change in the Swedish banking industry

As described in a previous subchapter in this introduction, the traditional banking industry in, primarily, industrialized countries, is reported to be in a state of transformation and flux. In the Swedish banking industry, like in all the other markets and in many other industries it seems, there is a lot of buzz around a technological paradigm shift, which often is referred to as a ‘digital transformation’ (e.g. Handelsbanken, 2018; Nordea, 2018; SEB, 2018a).

Here, within the Swedish banking industry and beyond, in the espoused transformation from a present state A to a (digital) future state B, this ‘movement’ is frequently narrated as a (change) journey. Specifically, a ‘digital journey’ and/or a ‘digitization journey’. In other words, at the time of this study, it seemed to be a lot of traveling going on in the Swedish banking industry (cf. ‘mimetic isomorphism’, in DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

However, in this study, we delimited our empirical focus to one large Swedish bank, Swedbank, which, alike all the other players in the industry, had embarked on a journey of change. Furthermore, in Swedbank, it came to our attention that one of its top managers used a specific metaphor to illustrate the organization and the journey they had embarked on – a boat. This coupled with metaphoric utterances such as ‘everyone should sit in the same boat’ and ‘we need to row in the same direction’. This we found interesting, and we decided to accompany them on its journey – to explore the journey, the boat, its captain, and its crew. And, in hindsight, it may be argued to have been a bumpy ride. Welcome on board.

1.5 Purpose, research questions, and aims

This study explores symbolic management attempts of strategic change in an organization. Specifically, we explore metaphors in use in the symbolic management of strategic change along three hierarchical levels – top management, middle management, and co-workers – in

Swedbank from a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Here, the principal metaphors in use in the discourse of strategic change were journeys and boats. Top management was understood as the senders of the sensegiving attempts, middle management was both the receivers and senders, and the co-workers were the end receivers.

The main purpose of the study was to develop a better understanding of the discursive, cognitive and emotional experiences of symbolic management attempts of strategic change and its enactment in the imperfect organizational practice from both a managerial and a non-managerial perspective. The main research question was as follows:

- How do managers and non-managers construct, make sense of and enact managerial metaphors in the symbolic management of change?

To answer this main research question, we posed three research subquestions that guided us throughout the research project:

- (1) How are the managerial metaphors theorized in the discourse of change?
- (2) How are the managerial metaphors made sense of?
- (3) How are the managerial metaphors enacted in practice?

Theoretically, we problematize some of the prevailing assumptions underpinning the existing body of knowledge regarding the use (and misuse) of metaphors as a sensemaking and sensegiving device in the symbolic management of strategic change through adopting an ambiguity-centred approach to organizations (Martin & Meyerson, 1988) and including the voices of the frequently ignored receiving end (Bartunek et al. 2006). Pointing at, among other things, its variations in discourse, divergences in meanings, differences in emotional response and some of its problems, pitfalls, and limitations in its enactment in practice.

Empirically, we offer thick descriptions of managers' and non-managers' experiences of a challenging and symbolically-laden strategic change process in the making. Here, we used metaphors both as a vehicle to explore, unpack and develop a better understanding of complex organizational phenomena and as an empirical phenomenon in itself (Cornelissen et al. 2008). Practically, on the backdrop of the theoretical contributions and the empirical findings, we paved the way for a reflexive approach to metaphor in strategic change work in organizations. In the next chapter, we discuss how this knowledge was arrived at.

2. Methodology and method

In this second chapter, we describe how we crafted the study along with reflecting on our methodological choices and its practical implications. The chapter is organized as follows: the research strategy, the research design and methods, the collection of empirical material, the analysis of empirical material, and ethical considerations and the quality of our work.

2.1 The research strategy

In this subchapter, we outline our qualitative research strategy. This includes, among other things, a discussion on the knowledge interest, the explanatory model, our broad interpretive repertoire, the philosophical underpinnings, the interpretive research paradigmatic position, metatheoretical inspirations, and, lastly, our approach to language and discourse.

2.1.1 Practical knowledge interest, abductive reasoning, and reflexive interpretation

Throughout the project, our knowledge production was guided by an interest in exploring – rather than predicting and explaining – organizational (social) phenomena from the natives’ point of view to develop a better understanding of it (cf. ‘ideographic approach’, in Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Accordingly, our research was grounded in a practical knowledge interest (cf. Habermas, 1972, in Willmott, 1997). Given this knowledge interest, we concluded that talking to and observing inhabitants of an organization may be a fruitful strategy (cf. Geertz, 1973, to be discussed further in subchapter 2.2). An inquiry in which we were particularly, but not exclusively, interested in the qualitative aspects of organizational life (cf. ‘qualitative empirical material’, in Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

As an explanatory model, we employed an abductive and/or an emergent-spontaneous approach to research (cf. Alvesson, 2003a; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). Thus, while we had defined a topic beforehand – managerial leadership (and followership) from, primarily, the co-workers point of view (e.g. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Meindl, 1995) – to bring about a sense of direction to the field work (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015), our exploration was neither caught in a positivist hypothetic-deductive straightjacket (e.g. Popper, 1959) nor a (naïve) inductivist position (cf. Chalmers, 1976). In other words, when other ‘puzzles’ (cf. Morgan, 1980) emerged when we analyzed our empirical material and reviewed the research literature in the field of study, we revised the purpose, aims and research questions in light of these tentative findings (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Ryan & Bertrand, 2003).

This weaving back and forth between theory and empirical material (cf. ‘the circle of alethic hermeneutics’, Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018), along with moving from parts to whole (cf. ‘the circle of objectivist hermeneutics’, Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018), were part of an ongoing process of problematization (cf. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; 2014). Here, we used the empirical material as a critical dialogue partner to construct theory on empirical grounds (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) – in an interplay between the practically accomplishable and the intellectual ideal (cf. Styhre, 2013). A reflexive pragmatist position (cf. Alvesson, 2011) to research which, gradually, progressed into an interest in studying metaphors in use in the symbolic management of strategic change (to be described in the next chapter).

To address the challenge of accomplishing a meaningful trade-off between empirical openness and theoretical rigor (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2014), we worked with a broad interpretive repertoire (cf. ‘reflexive interpretation’, in Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). We drew, for example, theoretical inspiration from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), phenomenological symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003, to be discussed in subchapter 2.1.3), and postmodern thought on knowledge claims, language and authorship (e.g. Alvesson, 2002, to be discussed in section 2.5.2).

2.1.2 Philosophical underpinnings, research paradigm, and metatheoretical inspiration

As the next step in this chapter, to further clarify the assumptions upon which we crafted this study, the philosophical underpinnings, the paradigmatic research position and the principal metatheoretical inspiration are addressed. In light of our (practical) knowledge interest in exploring the intersubjective inner and outer lifeworld of individual organizational actors to get a better understanding of it, we assumed a phenomenological-hermeneutic understanding of knowledge (cf. Ricoeur, 1981; Weber, 1949) and the social reality a socially constructed in language and symbolic interaction (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). In other words, we worked along the assumptions of an interpretivist epistemology and a social constructivist ontology (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015; Prasad, 2018).

Accordingly, along with using abduction as an explanatory model and an ideographic methodology, we adopted a qualitative research strategy (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015). And to position our study in Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) heuristic of sociological paradigms and organizational analysis, it may be argued to have been grounded in an interpretive paradigm

of research, and we used symbolic interactionism – especially a discursive reading of it (cf. Fine, 1992) – as principal metatheoretical inspiration.

In brief, Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest that the term symbolic interactionism was derived by Blumer (1969) from the work of Mead (1934) and the distinction between ‘non-symbolic interaction’ and ‘symbolic interaction’. In which the latter level of interaction, as opposed to the former, is argued to involve human beings interpreting (social) acts of others and responding to these on the basis of the meanings they make of them (cf. Blumer, 1969). Accordingly, when crafting research in the symbolic interactionist tradition and the purpose is to develop a better understanding of socially constructed phenomena, the primary matter of social scientific inquiry is argued to be the exploration of human beings’ world of objects (cf. ‘Lebenswelt’, Weber, 1949). To, in turn, unpack the multiple meanings these ‘objects’ hold for different social actors in different walks of organizational life (cf. Blumer, 1969).

The use of a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1979) as a principal theoretical lens to make sense of the symbolic management of strategic change may – given the metatheoretical framework, research paradigmatic position, philosophical underpinnings and methodological choices – be argued to be a plausible source of inspiration. This as sensemaking and sensegiving are said to be a theoretical offspring of phenomenology, sociology of knowledge and symbolic interactionism (e.g. Brown, Colville & Pye, 2015; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, and to be described in Chapter 3). Also, in this study, we put particular focus on language and discourse. The next section is, therefore, devoted to clarifying our take on that.

2.1.3 Language and discourse

Discourse, and language in general, have in recent decades become a key object of study in the field of organization and management studies (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Prasad, 2018). This as part of a philosophical shift in the social sciences – sometimes referred to as the ‘linguistic turn’ (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a) – that, among other things, critiques and problematizes positivist and romantic conceptions of language as mirroring the outer and/or inner worlds of subjective actors (cf. Alvesson, 2003b; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

While language is a central tenet in the philosophy of symbolic interactionism and its methodology is argued to include the taking of a problematized stance to it (e.g. Prus, 1996), some have argued that the study of language and meaning per se rarely constitutes part of its

research agenda (e.g. Boden, 1990). However, in the wake of the linguistic turn, the interest among symbolic interactionists to draw inspiration from poststructuralist thought and view language as the vehicle through which meaning itself is constructed and meaningful action enacted are argued to have grown (e.g. Fine, 1992). For example, Prasad and Prasad (2000) combined a symbolic interactionist position with an interest in discourse in an ethnographic study and suggested that the perspectives were ‘theoretically compatible’.

Before discussing the implications of being sensitive to the linguistic turn in research, we present the working definitions of some key concepts and clarify our take on them – as it has been argued by others that there are confusingly many meanings and uses in the field (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). Onward, written and spoken language is organized under the label of text (cf. ‘organization as text’, in Czarniawska, 1998). And when we apply the term discourse, we mean the use of written and spoken language in a particular social context. Thus, discourse is understood as ‘text in context’ (van Dijk, 1990, p.164).

According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b), different versions of discourse analysis may be fruitfully analyzed along two key dimensions: formative range of discourse and the relation between discourse and meaning. Firstly, as symbolic interactionism is a micro-level metatheoretical framework (cf. Blumer, 1969), we were primarily interested in studying text in its local context. Thus, working along the assumption that text, in principle, may ‘only be understood in the context of the interactive situation in which it is produced’ (Cossette, 1998, p.1382). However, as the (con)text of study is part of a broader organizational and societal landscape (cf. Denzin, 1992), we were also interested in discursive patterns beyond the local level (cf. ‘meso-discourse approach’, in Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b).

Secondly, regarding the relation between discourse and meaning, we assumed a tight – as opposed to a loose – coupling (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). Thus, in the footsteps of Weedon (1987) and poststructuralist thought, subjectivity was to a greater extent than in traditional symbolic interactionism understood as constituted through discourse – rather than expressing it (cf. Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). However, not in a strict Foucauldian sense (cf. ‘power/knowledge’, in Foucault, 1981). This as we did assume a level of individual agency (cf. ‘determinism-voluntarism’, Bourdieu, 1972; Giddens, 1976).

In sum, to position our take on discourse in the framework suggested by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b, see figure below), we adopted a close-range/determination approach. In other words, texts (e.g. interview transcripts, annual reports) were treated as local, emergent

constructs holding the potential of providing clues about – rather than representing – non-textual phenomena (cf. ‘discursive-pragmatism’, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Kärreman, 2014; Kärreman & Levay, 2017, to be discussed further in section 2.2.2). Thus, the research process in general and our interaction with the field in particular, may perhaps most plausibly be metaphorically described as a detective inquiry in which we gathered clues to construct and solve a mystery (cf. Asplund, 1970) – rather than that we uncovered the ‘truth’.

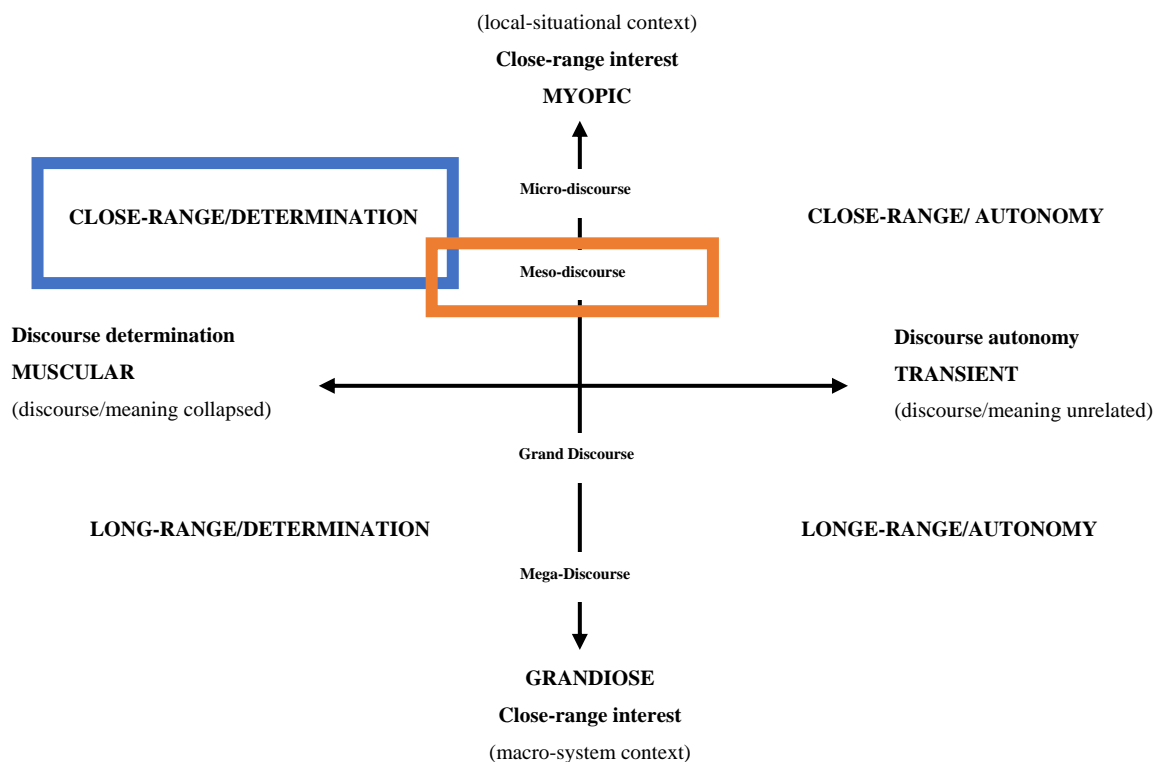


Figure 1. Dimensions and positions in discourse studies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b, p.1135)

In addition, from a discursive standpoint, text is action (cf. Boden, 1990). Put simply, ‘people do things with words’ (Lacity & Janson, 1994, p.145). Therefore, the social reality is sometimes argued to be constructed through language and talked into being (e.g. Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) – or becoming (e.g. Tsoukas, Chia, 2002) – as discourse word the world and the self in particular ways and, thus, constitutes particular ways of seeing and being (cf. Fairclough, 1995). In other words, to connect this to our elaboration on discourse and meaning, we assumed that the former framed the latter in the sense that it influences the construction of text which in turn may – or may not – frame cognition, emotions, and action (e.g. Watson, 1994). Accordingly, to bring about a better understanding of organizational

phenomena, it is of interest to explore how ‘objects’ (e.g. strategic change) are theorized in discourse among the inhabitants being studied (cf. Koch & Deetz, 1981; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, Tietze, Cohen & Musson, 2003, and to be discussed further in section 2.4.2).

2.2 The research design and methods

While the research strategy, as outlined in the previous subchapter, is said to be the general orientation to the craft of research, the research design is argued to be the framework for the collection and analysis of the empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this study, the selection of research design was guided by the research strategy along with considerations of criteria for quality employed when assessing qualitative research (cf. Tracy, 2010, and to be discussed further in section 2.5.2). Further, the research methods are simply understood as different techniques for constructing empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, the selection of the research strategy, design, and methods were made in dialogue with the overall purpose, aims and research questions of the study (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

2.2.1 Ethnographically-inspired, longitudinal qualitative case study

Given our qualitative research strategy in general along with that we were to develop a better understanding of and make modest knowledge claims about three interrelated levels of the organizational experience (i.e. text, meaning, and practice, in Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a), the research design and the methods for collecting the empirical material had to allow us to get intimate access to the inhabitants’ (symbolic) lifeworld (cf. Rock, 2007). Therefore, to answer the research questions and, in turn, to realize the overall purpose and aims of the study, we conducted an explorative ethnographically-inspired, longitudinal qualitative case study (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989; Geertz, 1973; Morgan & Smircich, 1980; Pettigrew, 1990).

The research design entailed, in other words, a detailed and intensive exploration of a single case organization – or, a limited part of it – over time from within with the purpose of getting a better understanding of its particularities (rather than generalities). Specifically, we employed what Yin (1984, p.39) refers to as a single-case (embedded) design. A design that entails the use of a single case (e.g. an organization) and multiple units – and/or levels – of analysis (e.g. different parts of the organization, different hierarchical levels). In this study, the former provided the context of the latter – the principal unit of analysis being groups of

individuals along three hierarchical levels (top management, middle management, and co-workers) in the organization under study (i.e. Swedbank).

To clarify what we mean when using the concept ‘ethnographically-inspired’, parallels may be drawn to the distinction between a micro- and a macro-ethnography (Wolcott, 1995, p.102), or a small e and a big E ethnography (Hackett, 2016, p. xii). Given that we primarily, but not exclusively, were interested in local, emergent sensemaking of individuals around specific constructs (e.g. metaphors) and artefacts rather than broader organizational, cultural and societal patterns, along with that we relied heavily on other methods for collecting the empirical material rather than first-hand, real-time observations and that the research project only stretched over a couple of months (rather than years), our study may most plausibly be described as a micro – or small e – ethnography in a triple sense (time, space and methods).

In light of drawing inspiration from the ethnographic research tradition when crafting this study, we tried (as far as practically possible and ethically justifiable) ‘getting to know the inhabitants, learning their vocabulary and habits, and understanding what is important and meaningful to them’ (Prasad, 2018, p.26). Here, we argue, it may for analytical purposes be motivated to think of the organization as a culture (cf. ‘root metaphor of the organization’, in Smircich, 1983b, p.347), rather than culture as variable, or subsystem, of the organization.

Alvesson (2013b, p.2) defines culture as ‘a system of common symbols and meanings’. When studying culture, Alvesson, Kärreman and Ybema (2017) outline three interrelated strategies to facilitate a relaxation of a priori understanding and, thus, thick descriptions of layered interpretations beyond surface-level symbolism: immersive study, defamiliarization, and radical problematization. The two former strategies address the balancing act between closeness to and distance from the subjects under study (to be discussed further below) and the latter strategy addresses the need of adopting a critical, reflexive approach to research (cf. ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, Prasad, 2018; ‘reflective practitioner’ Schön, 1983).

The selection of an organization to act as a case study in which to conduct the small e ethnographic investigation was primarily informed by considerations of accessibility and practicability (cf. Rock, 2007). Accordingly, we employed a convenience sampling strategy (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Swedbank, a large Swedish bank, was selected as a case study and two of its local branches provided the setting in which the study was conducted (a detailed description of the case study organization and the research setting is presented in Chapter 4).

We received access to the sites because one of the authors is working part-time at the branches. During the project period, he worked around 20 hours a week in average and he has, altogether, been working in the organization for over one year. Therefore, this (partly) included the challenge of being native – going stranger (cf. ‘insider-ethnography’, ‘at-home-ethnography’, ‘self-ethnography’, Alvesson, 2003a; Alvesson, 2009; Skrutkowski, 2014). In other words, the challenge of making the familiar strange (i.e. ‘defamiliarization’, Alvesson, Kärreman & Ybema, 2017; van Maanen, 1995).

In light of ‘our’ a priori understanding of the research settings, its inhabitants and the broader context under study, parallels may be drawn to the balancing act between closeness to and distance from the natives being part of the study, as mentioned earlier. To address this challenge, in addition to the strategies for studying culture suggested by Alvesson, Kärreman and Ybema (2017) outlined above, we tried to work with – rather than ‘eliminating’ and/or ‘wishing away’ – our (inevitable) biases and blind spots (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

For example, when reflecting on the duality of roles in ‘participant observations’ (i.e. ‘participant’ and ‘observer’, in Rock, 2007, p.32, to be discussed further in section 2.3.3), the insider researcher enacted the role of the participant and the outsider researcher enacted the role of the observer (see Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, for an example). Thus, in a research partnership based on mutual trust and respect (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006), we continuously engaged in processes of dialogue and feedback to collaboratively come to terms with what we saw, how it may be understood and if (and/or how) it may be understood differently. This to facilitate a reflexive research practice (to be discussed further in section 2.5.2).

2.2.2 Multiple research methods

In light of our aim to offer thick descriptions of managers’ and non-managers constructions, sensemaking (and sensegiving) and enactment in a symbolically-laden strategic change process, we used three research methods for ‘collecting’ the empirical material: open-ended, semi-structured qualitative interviewing (e.g. Kvale, 1996), overt participant observations (e.g. Jorgensen, 1989), and document studies (e.g. Bowen, 2009). Accordingly, the empirical material included accounts from both primary and secondary sources (cf. ‘narrating sources’ and ‘remnant sources’, Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017) collected through both first-hand, real-time observations in the field and second-hand, past- and future-oriented interviewing and document studies (cf. Pettigrew, 1990; to be discussed further in the next subchapter).

When employing more than one research method and/or source of empirical material, it is sometimes referred to as ‘triangulation’ (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015). We did not, however, primarily use multiple methods to zoom in on the truth (Alvesson, 2003a, p.172) to, in turn, make claims of building stronger empirically grounded theory (as assumed in ‘qualitative positivism’, e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In contrast, we used multiple methods to open up the empirical material for multiple (re)readings and, thus, the possibility of arriving at a richer picture of the topics of interest (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

The second rationale for using multiple research methods was due to that we embarked on going beyond the level of text to, in addition, say something interesting about the level of meaning and the level of practice (cf. ‘discursive pragmatism’, in Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a). Accordingly, we defended claims on the level of text, meaning respectively practice with textual, ethnographic respectively observational ‘evidence’ (Kärreman, 2014, p.212).

2.3 The collection of empirical material

In the previous subchapter on research design and methods, we disclosed that we crafted an explorative ethnographically-inspired, longitudinal qualitative case study and that we used three methods for collecting empirical material: interviews, participant observations, and document studies. In this subchapter, we discuss the sources and the collection of empirical material. While we employed a convenience sampling strategy when selecting the case study organization, we selected the informants, events, and documents to study on the backdrop of both practical and theoretical considerations (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015).

2.3.1 The research sites

The two bank branches that, primarily, provided the setting in which the study was conducted were part of a branch area consisting of four local, geographically dispersed bank branches. A branch area that, in turn, is part of a region (to be discussed in more detail in chapter 4). The identity of the region, the branch area, the local branches and the informants are not to be disclosed (according to an agreement of anonymity). Therefore, the region is referred to as the Region, the branch area as the Branch Area, the branches as the Branch A respectively Branch B (and C and D), and the informants were given pseudonyms. The reason why we collected empirical material from multiple sites was not to make comparisons between the two samples – but, primarily, because of practical considerations (cf. Styhre, 2013).

2.3.2 Open-ended, semi-structured qualitative interviewing

We conducted 15 interviews in total with 13 different informants (see overview below) and the interviews lasted between approximately 30 to 120 minutes. All interviews were – after having received the permission from the informants – audio recorded and transcribed in their entirety. The interview language was Swedish, and the passages in the texts that were found to be of relevance to include in the paper were translated by us into English (for a discussion about translation dilemmas in qualitative research, e.g. Temple & Young, 2004).

Position	Number of people interviewed	Total number of interviews	Type of interview
Head of Swedish Banking	1	1	Over telephone
Head of the Region	1	1	In-person
Branch Area Manager	1	1	In-person
Branch Manager	3	5	In-person
Co-worker	5	5	In-person
Former co-worker	1	1	In-person
Insider researcher	1	1	In-person
Total	13	15	

Table 1. Interviews, an overview.

We conducted 14 face-to-face interviews and one telephone interview. The latter, with the Head of Swedish Banking, was made over the telephone due to geographical distance. And the former category, the face-to-face interviews, were conducted at the local branches except for three of them – the interview with the Head of the Region, the former co-worker, and the researcher. Both of us attended and participated in all the interviews. The insider researcher led all the interviews (except the one in which he was the interviewee), while the outsider researcher took notes and nodded encouragingly (to be discussed further below).

The sampling strategy that we employed when selecting interviewees was, as signaled earlier, based on both practical and theoretical considerations. Firstly, the informants had to be available and interested in being part of the study. And secondly, as we were interested

in exploring how the phenomena under study were experienced along different hierarchical levels in the organization, we had to negotiate access to co-workers, middle managers and top managers (cf. ‘stratified sampling’, Bryman & Bell, 2015). For purpose of clarification, in this study, the Head of Swedish Banking and the Head of the Region are referred to as top management, the Branch Area manager and the Branch managers are referred to as middle management, and the co-workers as co-workers (i.e. non-managerial position).

Before discussing how we conducted the practical interview work in the field, we will briefly provide the rationale for two things: why we did an interview with a former co-worker of the local organization and why we did an interview with the insider researcher. The former co-worker, whom in the recent past had been part of one of the local branches under study for about 1 year and whom now was working as another branch in Swedbank, was included in the sample to get access to additional narratives on topics of our interest from someone enjoying distance to the everyday muddle of the local organization (cf. Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p.196). Accounts which, primarily, were used to broaden our interpretive repertoire – rather than making comparisons and/or embark on empirical generalizability of our findings.

The interview with the insider researcher was conducted by the outsider researcher at the beginning of the project. Accordingly, the formers (pre)understanding – or, a particular version of it – was made explicit through the interviewing while, in tandem, it provided an opportunity for the other researcher to develop a better understanding of (the understanding of) the local organization. Hence, as with the interview with the former co-worker discussed earlier, this material was, primarily, used as part of our pursuit of crafting qualitative research in the spirit of reflexivity (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, to be discussed further in 2.5.2).

The practical interview work was done in three phases, and all interviews followed an open-ended, semi-structured format guided by an interview schedule that we had prepared beforehand on the basis of the research purpose (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015). In the first phase of interviewing, we conducted pilot interviews with two of the Branch managers in the local organization (and with the insider researcher). This with the purpose of coming to terms with what some of the natives’ ‘thought they were up to’ (Alvesson, 2013b, p.11).

Accordingly, in this first phase of interviewing, we asked fairly general questions such as: “How would you describe Swedbank as an organization?”, “How would you describe your role in everyday work?”, “How would you describe Swedbank’s main challenges, if any?”. Thus, within the ‘frame’ set out by our interview questions, the interviewees were

asked to freely elaborate on the things that they perceived as important and meaningful (cf. Kvale, 1996). And, when felt necessary, we asked follow-up questions such as: ‘Can you give an example of [...]?’’, “Do we understand it correctly if [...]?”, and so on.

In the second phase of interviewing, after having revised the interview schedule on the backdrop of interesting themes that had emerged from the tentative analysis of the empirical material collected in the former phase, we conducted interviews with the Head of the Region, the Branch Area manager, one Branch manager, four co-workers and the former co-worker. Thus, after the second phase of interviewing, all the managers in the local management team had been interviewed once – and we had conducted 11 of 15 interviews in total.

The interview schedule used when we interviewed the managers respectively the co-workers followed, in principle, the same logic. Firstly, we asked the informants about their formal title, role and work experience at Swedbank. Secondly, we asked them to describe Swedbank in general – including, among other things, its operations, vision, strategy, threats, opportunities, and challenges. Thirdly, we went from a general to a local organizational level, asking about their everyday work, the atmosphere at the bank branches (e.g. culture), the local challenges, and the roles of the managers respectively the co-workers.

After having asked all the questions from the predefined interview schedule, we further elaborated on themes that had emerged during the interviews that we found were of particular interest. Thus, while the first part of the interviews followed a semi-structured format, the second part – sometimes one hour long – may be described as an informal discussion (with a purpose and a direction). In addition, in the latter part, we were to a greater extent interested in the level of meaning (including emotions) and the level of practice. Accordingly, while the interview guides were purposefully designed to firstly explore the whole and after that its parts, the latter may – after having asked all the predefined questions – be argued to only have been touched upon on the surface level. Therefore, in the second part of interviewing, we went from descriptions of what is – to how it is understood, felt and enacted in practice.

For example, on the topic of change, we went from talking about change in general to ask questions such as: “What does change mean?”, “How does change feel?”, “How may change be understood in practice?”. Further, in this part of joint exploration, we shared some of our interpretations of both the answers from the interview at hand and from previous encounters with the field (without, for that matter, revealing the identity of whom said what). This was exemplified through that we, in a first step, briefly described our understanding of

something that we found ambiguous and, in a second step, reflected the thesis on the interviewees guided by questions such as: “What do you think about that?”, “How may this be understood?”, “Does that make sense?” (cf. Fontana & Frey, 2000).

In the third, and last, phase of interviewing, we conducted the interviews with the Head of Swedish Banking, one co-worker and follow-up interviews with the two Branch managers whom we had conducted the pilot interviews with. In this last phase of interviewing and in, approximately, half of the interviews in the second phase, we had a relatively clear idea of our main research interest. Hence, in these interviews, we went quite straight on the topics of (our) interest. Accordingly, the journey metaphor and the boat metaphor were addressed explicitly. For example, we showed the interviewees the boat image that the Head of Swedish Banking had sent out to all managers in the organization (to be described in detail in Chapter 4), and they were asked to put words on what they saw, what sense it made, and how it may and have been enacted into practice (cf. ‘visual ethnography’, Bryman & Bell, 2015).

2.3.3 Participant observations

In addition to the open-ended, semi-structured interviewing (and the document studies, to be discussed in the next section) the insider researcher conducted overt participant observations at the two local branches while working (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.454). Accordingly, to complement the (acontextual) empirical material collected through the other two research methods employed (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018), we conducted first-hand, real-time observations of naturally occurring events in the organization as well (cf. Jorgensen, 1989).

This, as we signaled in a previous section, with the purpose of getting a richer picture of the issues and the context at hand (cf. ‘thick descriptions’, in Geertz, 1973, p.3) to ‘defend [knowledge] claims on the level of practice with observational evidence [and] claims on the level of meaning with ethnographic evidence’ (Kärreman, 2014, p.212). For example, when we interviewed the informants, they were asked to reflect and put words on some events that ‘we’ had observed. Asking questions such as: “What was on the agenda?”, “What was the purpose of the [...]?”, “How did you experience the [...]?”.

The roles enacted by the insider researcher as participant and/or observer in a research-focused sense may be said to have varied in relative intensity depending on the situation (cf. Alvesson, 2003a). For example, in every day (part-time) work as a customer service agent and private advisor, the insider researcher may perhaps most accurately be labeled as an

‘observing participant’ (cf. Alvesson, 2003a, p.174) – rather than the reverse. In other words, here, participation came first – observation second. While, for example, when the insider researcher took part in meetings held in the local Branch Area (e.g. weekly, monthly and/or quarterly meetings of varied kinds), the role as a participant observer may be argued to have been more prominent – taking detailed notes on, among other things, what was said and by whom (cf. Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Given the purpose of the study, three quarterly meetings in which (nearly) all inhabitants of the local organization participated were found to be of particular interest to be subjected to close readings (cf. ‘theoretical sampling’, in Glaser & Strauss, 1967; and to be presented in Chapter 4).

2.3.4 Document studies

When conducting qualitative case study research in organizations, organizational documents (e.g. annual reports, internal powerpoint presentations) are often used as (complementary) sources of empirical material (cf. Bowen, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989). And, by some, said to be a source of particular relevance to use when studying change (e.g. Pettigrew, 1990). In this study, we studied Swedbank’s annual reports published between 1989 to 2018 (30 years). We selected the sample on the basis of availability (cf. ‘convenience sampling’, in Bryman & Bell, 2015), as the oldest respectively the latest annual reports electronically available on Swedbank’s (2018b) web site at the time of the study were dated 1989 respectively 2018.

The purposes of studying the annual report were twofold. Firstly, we used the material to construct a general description of the organization and its history (to be presented in the introductory section in Chapter 4). Secondly, we studied the annual reports to explore and develop a better understanding of how the organization, its environment and its challenges in general, and (strategic) change in particular, had, historically, been theorized in discourse (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

For example, the document studies allowed us to put the informants’ accounts (and/or stories) and our observations in a broader spatiotemporal context (or plot) which, in turn, helped us to see that some discourses were an omnipresent feature of the organizations social fabric (or metanarrative) (cf. ‘the circle of objectivist hermeneutics’, Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). For example, narratives of change, globalization, the knowledge economy, increased competition, rationalizations, technological innovations and market shifts had always – or,

at least in the interval studied – been part of the organizational vocabulary (cf. ‘narrating the organization’, Czarniawska, 1997, and to be described further in Chapter 4).

In other words, when our sources constructed similar accounts, they may simply have been ‘caught’ in the same (powerful) discourse (cf. Foucault, 1981) and/or drawing linguistic resources from the same corporate-sponsored interpretive repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This without, for that matter, to neglect that there might be going on something behind the level of text (cf. ‘linguistic reductionism’, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a). However, this should be established on a posteriori basis, and its relevance demonstrated (Alvesson, 2016).

2.4 The analysis of empirical material

In this subchapter, we discuss how the empirical material was analyzed. The subchapter is organized in two sections. Firstly, we discuss how the empirical material was categorized, sorted and reduced. Secondly, we discuss how we constructed our argument.

2.4.1 Categorization, sorting and reducing

As signaled previously, we audio recorded and transcribed the interviews in their entirety. Successively, after each interview had been transcribed, we engaged in readings of the texts. In this initial process of analysis, when interpreting the content of passages and/or sentences in the narratives told, we were guided by questions such as: “What is this an example of?”, “How may this be understood?”, “What is the informant trying to accomplish?”.

After having come to terms with what it, tentatively, may be an example of and how it may be understood, the passage and/or sentence was ‘coded’ (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and copied from the transcribed document into a separate ‘data analysis document’ in which it was organized under a thematic category (cf. ‘categorization’, in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). A process of coding and categorization that may be said to have been, throughout the enterprise, (pre)structured by the interview questions asked along with our theoretical (and cultural) preunderstandings and available vocabularies (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

Further, to the respective ‘chunk of empirical material’, the informants’ initials were added along with a reference to the page in the original transcribed document from which it had been ‘lifted’. The purpose of doing this was twofold. Firstly, for us to be able to identify its narrator. Secondly, for us to be able to (re)read the passage and/or sentence in its original textual context (cf. Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In addition, when reflecting on the empirical

material, we added notes in the margin and marked parts (e.g. in bold, cursive and/or colored font) which, on the backdrop of our research interest, were found to be of particular interest. At the end of the research project, our ‘data analysis document’ contained approximately 120 000 words, spread on nearly 300 pages (table of contents, headings, and notes included).

In parallel with collecting, transcribing, reading, coding and categorizing the empirical material – and literature reviewing (cf. ‘abductive approach’, in Swedberg, 2014) – as we described above, we (continuously) engaged in sorting the passages and/or sentences in the ‘data analysis document’ in light of that we, over time, developed a better understanding of both the theoretical and empirical field under study (cf. ‘sorting’, in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). Accordingly, the process of categorizing the empirical material involved, primarily, making sense of what it may be an example of and how it may be understood in relation to the text itself and the context in which it had been articulated (cf. ‘discourse analysis’, Potter & Wetherell, 1987). While, in contrast, the process of sorting involved making sense of the text in relation to other texts (cf. ‘intertextuality’, Fairclough, 1995; ‘constant comparison’, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In other words, the latter process was guided by questions such as: “How may this be understood in relation to what we already know [and/or have been told by other informants and/or have been observed]?” (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

In addition to categorizing and sorting the empirical material, it was also reduced in light of the (revised) research questions (cf. ‘reducing’, in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). Here, while more or less everything was targeted for close readings at the beginning of the project, we became, over time, a bit more selective. And after having analyzed and discussed the empirical material collected from the 15 interviews, the participant observations of key events and everyday work and document studies of annual reports, we felt confident that we had reached a point of ‘theoretical saturation’ (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

2.4.2 Constructing an argument

Through early interpretations of the empirical material, we found that our informants often spoke in metaphorical terms when narrating their experience of life in the organization. For example, the change was constructed as a journey (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; to be explored in the next chapter). In addition, it came to our attention that management used a metaphor – a boat – to conceptualize the organization in this process (or journey). This resulted in a

research interest in how the informants – top managers, middle managers, and co-workers – constructed, made sense of and enacted the metaphors in the discourse of strategic change.

We explored the metaphors through, conceptually, extending them (cf. Cornelissen et al. 2008). Accordingly, we used metaphors both as a vehicle for analyzing and to understand the messy social realities of organizations – a deductive/nomothetic approach to metaphor – and as an empirical phenomenon in itself – an inductive/ideographic approach to metaphor (cf. Oswick & Grant, 1996b; Steen, 2007; Örtenblad, 2017).

This is interesting because, when using metaphors in discourse, some elements in the image are taken for granted or hidden, and they mean different things to different people in different situations (e.g. Alvesson, 2013b). In other words, a refined understanding of, for example, strategic change in organizations, may not only be facilitated by using different (root) metaphors as lenses of inquiry (cf. Morgan, 1986; 1988; 1993) – but by exploring the metaphors ‘behind’ the metaphor (i.e. ‘second-level metaphors’, Alvesson, 1993b).

Thus, as ‘a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing’ (Burke, 1935, p.49, in Morgan, 1986), exploring metaphors in use in the symbolic management of strategic change through extending them from a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), may help us see, think and act in new ways. In other words, it may bring the conditions to craft new knowledge and develop a better understanding of complex social phenomena in organizations (cf. Koch & Deetz, 1981; Morgan, 1980, to be explored in the next chapter).

Taken together, we worked along the assumptions of a category of discourse analysis that Putnam and Fairhurst (2001, p.87) refer to as ‘cognitive linguistics’, which they argue is translated into the broad category of sensemaking (cf. Weick, 1995, to be discussed in the upcoming chapter) when employed in organization and management studies. Thus, and in line with a phenomenological symbolic interactionist stance (cf. Blumer, 1969), the focus in our analysis was, primarily, neither on linguistic structures or codes nor what the contextual elements (e.g. environmental, cognitive, emotional and/or linguistic) represented in a literal sense, but how it was ‘seen as’ and ‘felt like’ when theorized in discourse (cf. ‘sensemaking as a constructivist practice’, Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

Here, parallels may be drawn to the theory of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, and in line with our close-range/determination approach to discourse (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b), we were particularly interested in exploring the specific uses

and meanings of metaphors in situ – rather than, primarily, on a acontextual conceptual level (cf. Oswick, Putnam & Keenoy, 2004; Putnam & Boys, 2006).

Furthermore, by the same token, we addressed the ‘problems’ of representation and ambiguity of language through what Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) refer to as a metaphor-driven data-constructionist approach to the empirical material. Accordingly, and as signaled above, we used figurative means (metaphor) to creatively interpret and portray a particular part of the organizational experience as it was theorized in discourse among our informants and in other sources of empirical material. For example, if we see change as a journey (e.g. Inns, 1996), it may include seeing the members of the organization as guides and/or travelers (e.g. Marshak, 1993a). In light of this, the first research subquestion we asked ourselves was: How are the managerial metaphors theorized in the discourse of change?

After that, as a next step in the analysis of the empirical material, we asked ourselves: How are the managerial metaphors made sense of? Accordingly, we moved beyond the level of text to the level of meaning. And, lastly, we asked ourselves: How are the managerial metaphors enacted in practice? Thus, we moved beyond the level of text and the level of meaning to the level of practice. By answering these subquestions, we were able to answer our main research question:

- How do managers and non-managers construct, make sense of and enact managerial metaphors in the symbolic management of change?

And, accordingly, by answering these questions through constructing an argument – this text (Alvesson, Hardy & Hartley, 2008; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011) – we realized the overall research purpose and the theoretical, empirical and practical aims of the study.

2.5 Ethical considerations and the quality of our work

In this subchapter, we discuss ethical considerations and the quality of our work. We have, however, throughout this paper in general and in this chapter in particular, tried to engage in the delicate act of showing – rather than telling – our (reflexive) approach to research ethics and qualitative quality (and to be discussed further below).

2.5.1 Ethical considerations

Drawing inspiration from Guillemin and Gilliam (2004) framework for thinking about what constitutes ethical research practice and how it may be achieved when crafting research in

an ethnographically-inspired, qualitative research tradition, we used the notion of reflexivity as a conceptual tool for acknowledging and being sensitive towards inevitable (micro)ethical tensions in the everyday research practice (and, in addition, to craft high-quality qualitative research, cf. Tracy, 2010, to be discussed further in the next section). This included, among other things, that we tried to be attentive to and reflective about the ethical issues permeating the research process in general and its implications in relation to our informants – and the case study organization – in particular (cf. Styhre, 2013).

As mentioned in a previous section, to safeguard the integrity of and avoid potential harm to the informants, we have given them and the research sites pseudonyms along with having taken other measures considered necessary to ensure their anonymity. Further, we conducted overt – as opposed to covert – participant observations (for a discussion about the ethical dilemmas involved in the latter type of field work, see for example Bulmer, 1982). And we informed our informants – and all the other inhabitants populating the research sites – about, among other things, the topic and the purpose of our study (in a general sense) along with how the empirical material collected were going to be used and the conditions for their (voluntary) participation (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015; Guillemin & Gilliam, 2004).

For example, when doing interviews, we tried to be transparent to and, particularly at the end of the sessions, engage in dialogue with and joint exploration of the topics of mutual interest. Thus, we gave the informants the opportunity to reflect on, comment, clarify, reject and/or problematize our initial interpretations of what they and (anonymous) others had been described to us (cf. Alvesson, 2011; ‘interviews as negotiated text’, Fontana & Frey, 2000).

In addition, ethical dilemmas may be said to, among other things, not only permeating the process of how the knowledge is constructed – but why and what kind of knowledge is constructed and, in turn, questions regarding whose interest it serves and what ends it may be used to achieve and/or legitimize (cf. ‘power/knowledge’, Foucault, 1981). For example, while our knowledge interest was practical (cf. Willmott, 1997), there are always risks that such knowledge may be used for exploitative – rather than explorative – purposes (cf. debate on ‘(dis)engagement’ in critical management studies, Fournier & Grey, 2000). Our hope is, however, that the knowledge this paper may bring about is used for the gains of the many under conditions of ‘ideal speech’ (cf. Habermas, in Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

2.5.2 Quality in qualitative research

In light of the philosophical, metatheoretical and methodological assumptions upon which the study was crafted, that have been discussed and reflected on in considerable depth in this chapter, we had no intention of adhering to the virtues of (quantitative) quality embarked on by the (neo-)positivist research community, such as criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, and so on (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1984). However, this is not to say that qualitative research is to be exempted from critical scrutiny, but that its ‘scientific’ merits are to be assessed on the basis of alternative quality criteria – in tune with the tenets of an interpretive/constructivist paradigm of social research (cf. Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

For example, Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest trustworthiness and authenticity as two sets of criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research. They argue that the former criteria incorporate four dimensions that each has an equivalent criterion used in positivist research (as previously mentioned, in brackets): credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity).

The latter set of criteria, authenticity, are said to include, among other things, how well the research fairly represents (and includes) different viewpoints held by the members of the social setting being studied (e.g. managers and co-workers), supports its members to arrive at a better understanding of the (organizational) reality, and creates conditions for informed social action. Further, Tracy (2010) suggests, in addition to and/or somewhat overlapping with the criteria already mentioned, criteria such as a worthy topic (e.g. interesting), rich rigor (e.g. time in the field) and sincerity (e.g. self-reflexivity and transparency).

Reflexivity has, as previously signaled, been used as a conceptual tool to temper – or, purposefully (re)direct – our (inevitable) biases and blind spots (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). An approach to research (and the researcher self) that included not only the taking of a problematized stance toward the relation between empirical material and the social reality it is (sometimes) argued to represent and/or correspond to (cf. Alvesson, 2003b), but also the relation between the research text and the same social reality – our own role as researchers in the making (cf. ‘reflexive textual practices’, in Alvesson, Hardy & Hartley, 2008).

In other words, we were trying to be reflective of the fact that the replication of social reality (this text) is not wholly genuine – but an artifact (cf. Rock, 2007). In other words, knowledge claims about the social reality, as experienced mainly through the eyes of others, is interpreted, constructed and written – not discovered (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018,

p.11). This together with the fact what we have (co-)constructed a particular version of it and not another – many other readings of the empirical material could have been made and, by the same token, many other stories could have been told (cf. ‘irony’, Alvesson, 2002).

Thus, this called for ongoing but somewhat pragmatic source critique and critical self-reflection on favored use of vocabulary and lines of inquiry (cf. Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017) – to open up, rather than (fore)close, the empirical material (cf. ‘reflexive interpretation’, in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This, in line with the practical knowledge interest, with the purpose of developing a better understanding of organizational social phenomena through the construction of theoretical language and heuristics for thinking to create the conditions for informed social action (cf. Brunsson, 1982).

Taken together, as signaled at the beginning of this subchapter on qualitative quality and ethical considerations, we have tried to illustrate – rather than tell – our methodological awareness (cf. Alvesson, 2011; Styhre, 2013; Tracy, 2010). Accordingly, our aim is that this chapter on methodology and method (and, in addition, this paper as a whole) has allowed you – the reader – to get a sense of what we read into these criteria for (qualitative) quality outlined above and how this understanding was translated into research practice. This so that you, in turn, may be able to make an informed assessment and judgment about the quality of our craft (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2015; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

2.6 Summary

In this last subchapter of the chapter of methodology and method, some of its key concepts and main points are summarized in the table below.

Subchapters	Notes
<p>2.1 The research strategy Qualitative research strategy</p>	<p>Knowledge interest: Practical Exploratory model: Abductive Epistemology: Interpretivism Ontology: Social Constructivism Research paradigm: Interpretive Metatheory: Symbolic interactionism Methodology: Ideographic Language and discourse: Close-range/Determination, Meso-discourse approach</p>

<p>2.2 The research design and method</p> <p>Ethnographically-inspired, longitudinal qualitative case study</p> <p>Multiple-methods approach</p>	<p>Design: Single case (embedded) design</p> <p>Ethnography: Micro-ethnography</p> <p>Discursive pragmatism: Level of text, level of meaning and level of practice</p> <p>Thick descriptions</p>
<p>2.3 The collection of empirical material</p>	<p>Interviews: Open-ended, semi-structured qualitative interviewing</p> <p>Observation: Overt participant observation</p> <p>Document studies: Qualitative content analysis</p>
<p>2.4 The analysis of empirical material</p>	<p>Analytical frame: Grounded Theory</p> <p>Discourse analysis: Cognitive linguistics</p> <p>Metaphor-driven, data-constructionist position</p>
<p>2.5 Ethical considerations and quality</p>	<p>Microethics</p> <p>Reflexivity</p> <p>Source critique</p> <p>Reflexive textual practices</p>

Table 2. Methodology and method, an overview

3. Literature review and theoretical framework

In this third chapter, we outline a literature review and our theoretical framework in light of which, in the upcoming chapters, the empirical material is made sense of and discussed. The chapter is organized into three subchapters. Firstly, we introduce change on the backdrop of strategy and symbolism in organizations. Secondly, in the context of the former, we describe the concepts of sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking. Thirdly, and lastly, we discuss the use and misuse of managerial metaphor in the symbolic management of strategic change.

3.1 Strategy, change, and symbolism

In this subchapter, we discuss strategy, change, and organizational symbolism. A review of literature which provides the theoretical backdrop of the study. Further, in the end section, to bridge this subchapter with the upcoming subchapters, we introduce the management of change. Specifically, the symbolic management of (strategic) change.

3.1.1 Strategy

To bring about conceptual clarity of strategy in the field of strategic management, Mintzberg (1987, p.11) suggested five definitions of strategy (referred to as the ‘Five Ps of Strategy’): Plan, Ploy, Pattern, Position, and Perspective. The first P, strategy as plan, is said to reflect a classic conception of strategy (cf. ‘linear strategy’, in Chaffee, 1985). In an organizational context, strategy as plan is an intended course of action to deal with the external environment (e.g. competition) to reach predefined goals (e.g. profit). Here, the organization is seen as a closed system (cf. ‘organization as machine’, in Morgan, 1986), a distinct entity separated from its external environment, and it is assumed that the strategists of the organization – top management and/or management consultants (cf. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990) – can manage the environment by means of instrumental rationality (cf. Chaffee, 1985). Further, the second P, strategy as ploy, is said to reflect strategy as plan in a more specific sense – a ‘maneuver’ as part of realizing the general (grand) plan (cf. Mintzberg, 1987).

The third P, strategy as pattern, is a pattern in action. Here, Mintzberg (1987) refers to this third definition as ‘realized strategy’ while, in contrast, both strategy as plan and strategy as ploy are referred to as ‘intended strategy’. In turn, he argues that the realized strategy may be ‘deliberate’ (i.e. with a plan/ploy) or ‘emergent’ (i.e. without a plan/ploy).

The fourth P, strategy as position, is the ‘alignment’ between the organization and its environment (cf. ‘adaptive strategy’, in Chaffee, 1985). In other words, to achieve a ‘match’ between the organizations (perceived) internal conditions (e.g. resources and capabilities) and its perceived external conditions (e.g. threats and opportunities) to achieve a competitive advantage (cf. ‘SWOT’-analysis, in Andrews, 1971). Here, the organization is seen as an open system (cf. ‘organization as organism’, in Morgan, 1986), and rather than embarking on an instrumental mean-end planning logic to deal with the environment to reach the goals of the organization, the key words are argued to be, in a greater extent, to adapt to and change with the environment (cf. Mintzberg, 1987).

The fifth P, strategy as perspective, is a particular (shared) way of perceiving the world (cf. ‘interpretive strategy’, in Chaffee, 1985). Here, the organization is seen as a system of shared meanings (cf. ‘organization as culture’, in Morgan, 1986; Smircich, 1983a), and the task of the strategists to deal with the environment (i.e. internal and external stakeholders) is not primarily to make physical changes in its outputs (as in the case of the ‘linear model’, in

Chaffee, 1985), but to manage its meanings in the collective mind through symbolic action and language games (cf. Mintzberg, 1987; Pettigrew, 1977; Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, 1978).

In the words of Chafee (1985, p.4) when paraphrasing Van Cauwenbergh and Cool (1982), ‘organizational culture is a powerful tool in the hands of top management’. In other words, here, the organizational culture is assumed to be a variable, and/or subsystem, among other for the administrative elite to manipulate as part of the business excellence project (e.g. Peters & Waterman, 1982; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983). Furthermore, from this perspective, not only top management is argued to have a key role to play in the process of formulating and implementing strategies – but middle management as well (e.g. Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). In the words of Heracleous (2003, p.79):

“The effects of middle managers on strategy implementation can be crucial.”

In sum, following Mintzberg (1987), the Ps in the ‘5Ps of Strategy’ are interlinked and complementary. Further, following Chafee (1985), the three models of strategy (i.e. linear, adaptive and interpretive) may, dependent on the complexity of the ‘system’, all be at play. In other words, alike the 5Ps of Mintzberg (1987), they provide different lenses – or (root) metaphors – to view and make sense of organizational phenomena (cf. Morgan, 1986).

In this study, we are primarily interested in exploring and making sense of meaning-making in the context of strategy realization (cf. ‘strategizing’, in Heracleous, 2003). In other words, and in light of that we assume that the (social) reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and that we use sensemaking and sensegiving as a theoretical lens (to be discussed in subchapter 3.2), we primarily draw inspiration from strategy as perspective (cf. ‘interpretive strategy’, in Chafee, 1985).

3.1.2 Strategy and change

Regardless of whether strategists of the modern corporation keep themselves preoccupied with constructing external threats and/or opportunities (i.e. ‘industry-based view of the firm’, Porter, 1980) or map out perceived internal strengths and/or weaknesses (i.e. ‘resource-based view of the firm’, in Barney, 1991), or both, for securing (long-term) survival, growth and profitability in what sometimes is referred to as a competitive business landscape, it is argued to, in principle, always be theorized in a muscular, managerialist discourse of change (e.g.

Abrahamson, 1996; Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011, Helms Mills, 2003). In the words of Heracleous (2003, p.78):

“Realizing strategy is about managing change, in all its complexity. Underestimating this simple fact is a recipe for failure.”

In a well-cited article, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p.443) define strategic change as:

“An attempt to change current modes of cognition and action to enable the organization to take advantage of opportunities or to cope with consequential environmental threats.”

Accordingly, strategic change is argued to involve ‘a fundamental alteration in the social construction of reality [among the members of the organization]’ (Gioia et al. 1994, p.363). Before discussing managerial attempts of bringing about and manage strategic change, we clarify our understanding of organizational change and symbolism below.

To understand organizational change, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015, p.17) suggest that four key dimensions may be of interest to reflect on: the sources of change, the content of change, the scale of change, and its political dimensions. The first dimension, the sources of change, is sometimes categorized as planned change or emergent change (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; and to be linked to the distinction between ‘deliberate strategy’ and ‘emergent strategy’, in Mintzberg, 1987). A distinction which, somewhat simplified, may be translated into top-down change versus bottom-up change. In strategic change, it is often managerially-initiated (cf. Gioia et al. 1994), and it may be embarked on as a result of both (perceived) external and internal pressures (or, as managerial identity work).

For example, Palmer, Dunford and Buchanan (2017, p.62) outline external pressures for change such as globalization, geopolitical instability, stakeholder pressures (e.g. CSR and shareholders), the knowledge economy, workforce composition, customer preferences and behaviors, regulations, technological innovations, competition, and so on. Furthermore, the impetus for change is also sometimes argued to be propelled by management fads and fashions (cf. Abrahamson, 1996), institutional pressures (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and/or ideological and political forces (e.g. ‘neoliberalism’, Cooke, 1999).

The second key dimension of organizational change, the content of change, is said to refer to the means and/or the outcomes of change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Here, and in light of our discussion in the previous section, corporate culture is often argued to be either the ‘tool’ or the ‘object’ to be (managerially) manipulated (e.g. Bate, 1995; Schein,

2010; Smircich, 1983b). If possible and/or ethically justifiable (e.g. Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003; Willmott, 1993). For example, following Johnson's (1992) 'cultural web', if situating the normative, rationalistic (n-step) models of change (e.g. Kotter, 1996) in the context of the 'organizational paradigm', its difficulties, limitations and ambiguities are highlighted (e.g. Martin & Meyerson, 1988; Meyerson & Martin, 1987).

The third dimension, the scale of change, is said to include two subdimensions: depth of change and rhythm of change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). The depth of change is often located at one of two extremes. For example, Bartunek and Moch (1987) talk about first-order change (i.e. change within the system) and second-order change (i.e. change of the system itself). Others make the distinction between incremental and radical change (e.g. Weick & Quinn, 1999), and/or transactional and transformational change (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). However, as people tend to hold different mental models of reality in general and organizations in particular, the same change may be constructed, made sense of and enacted differently by different individuals (cf. Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017).

The second subdimension of the scale of change, the rhythm of change, may be argued to be connected to the guiding – and/or constraining – (root) metaphor of the organization. Following Morgan (1986), and as signaled at the end of the previous section (alike in the previous paragraph), different assumptions of what (change) is and what (change) ought to be may make the change participant see, think and act in different ways. For example, if assuming that change – not stability – is the natural state of organizations (e.g. 'organization as a system of transformation and flux', in Morgan, 1986; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

The fourth and last key dimension of organizational change suggested by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015), the politics of change, is said to include elements such as power, politics, negotiation and resistance (cf. Hardy, 1996). Here, to draw symbolic resources from another of Morgan's (1986) metaphors of organization, it may be seen as a political system. In mainstream change management literature, if working within a top-down managerialist paradigm (cf. Alvesson & Willmott, 2012), resistance among the 'change recipients' is often constructed as a threat to 'successful' change implementation and, therefore, approached as a 'problem to be solved' (cf. Heracleous, 2003). This instead of seeing resistance as a voice of legitimate concern and/or a potential resource for change (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012).

For example, in the words of Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008, p.362), in an article in which they attempted to tell the 'rest of the story' of resistance to change (i.e. to unpack it):

“[T]he predominant perspective on resistance is decidedly one-sided, in favor of change agents and their sponsors. Studies of change appear to take the perspective, or bias, of those seeking to bring about change, in which it is presumed [that] change agents are doing the right and proper things while change recipients throw up unreasonable obstacles or barriers intent on ‘doing in’ or ‘screwing up’ the change. Accordingly, change agents are portrayed as undeserving victims of the irrational and dysfunctional responses of change recipients.”

Further, in their article, in contrast to the established scholarly truths about resistance at that time, they suggest that ‘change recipient resistance’ may be understood as: (1) Self-serving, self-fulfilling sensemaking of change agents, (2) Produced by change agents own actions and inactions, and/or (3) A resource for change (e.g. helping to keep the change conversation alive, reflecting a higher level of commitment to change than consent/acceptance, and/or a potentially strengthening value as a result of ‘functional conflict’).

In light of this, Ford, Ford and D’Amelio (2008) suggest a reconstruction of resistance, understood as an interplay among three elements: recipient action, agent sensemaking, and the agent-recipient relationship. The implications of this reconstruction, they argue, are that: (1) Resistance is ‘in between’ agents and recipients (not residing ‘over there’ or ‘within’ the recipient), (2) Resistance do not exist independent of the change agents sensemaking, and/or (3) The change agents role in overcoming resistance, to manage it, is to ‘take charge of the change dialogue [...] by bringing both agents and recipients background conversations to the fore and engaging in those actions needed to maintain and improve the agent-[recipient] relationship’ (Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008, p.373).

Furthermore, on the same topic, following Palmer, Dunford and Buchanan (2017), the causes of resistance (e.g. content, processes and/or uncertainty in general) and its behavioral manifestations (e.g. active and/or passive) varies. For example, ‘where past experience of change has been bad, cynicism and resistance may be default responses’ (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017, p.259). However, in the words of Fleming and Spicer (2003, p.160):

“Cynicism [...] unobtrusively reproduces relations of power because cynical employees are given (and give themselves) the impression that they are autonomous agents, but they still practice the corporate rituals nevertheless.”

Accordingly, the residual of resistance and/or cynicism on, for example, the realization of strategic change (beyond the level of talk), is an empirical question.

In sum, to connect the dots, ‘realizing strategy’ is about managing change. Strategic change is understood as a planned, transformational change programme orchestrated by the

top management to take advantage of perceived opportunities and/or to cope with perceived threats in its environment (cf. ‘grand technocratic project’, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Here, to ‘move’ the organization from a present state A to a future state B, it is understood as involving changes in the recipients’ mental models of themselves and their organizational reality (e.g. ‘[the] system of meanings and symbols’, Alvesson, 2013b). This in addition to changing subsystems of the organization, such as structure, management control systems, technology and/or personal concept (cf. Alvesson, 2004). Resistance to change is ambiguous and its effects are uncertain. Further, in the process of realizing strategy, middle management is said to have a key role to play – beyond being ‘change blockers’ (cf. Heracleous, 2003).

3.1.3 Strategy, change, and organizational symbolism

Now, after having introduced strategy and change in organizations and before discussing attempts of bringing about and manage the latter, we clarify our understanding of symbols and symbolism in organizations. Riceour (1976) argues that a symbol has a first and second order meaning: a linguistic meaning and a non-linguistic meaning (or, regarding the latter, a meaning of a meaning). Here, he suggests that non-linguistic meaning is the residue of the literal interpretation of a symbol (and/or artifact) – the ‘surplus of meaning’ (Riceour, 1976).

For example, in an organizational context, the literal meaning of an ‘open door’ policy is that managers’ (office) door is open to the employees. However, beyond (or behind) this literal meaning lies intersubjective and figurative associations, such as a manifestation of an open communication culture or, perhaps, a management hokum.

Further, following Morgan, Frost and Pondy (1983, p.4), symbolism is understood as ‘the practice of symbolic representation’. Thus, organizational symbolism is the practice of symbolic representations in an organizational context. In the words of Hatch (1993, p.673):

“Organizational members are symbol manipulators, creating as well as discovering meaning as they explore and produce a socially constructed [social] reality [...]. Symbolization refers to culturally contextualized meaning creation via the prospective use of objects, words, and actions. The objects, words, and actions are transformed (e.g. through communication) into symbols, the dynamic constellation of which constitutes the symbolic field of a culture. The symbolic field then retrospectively transfigures artifacts by imbuing them with the charms of surplus meaning.”

To understand the nature of (organizational) symbolism, Morgan, Frost and Pondy (1983, p.7) argue that is it helpful and important to be aware of three broad issues:

- (1) Symbols vary in degree of complexity;
- (2) Symbols may be created consciously or unconsciously; and
- (3) Symbols vary in the extent to which they are shared, and can be symbolic in different ways to different people, sometimes being vested with contradictory meanings.

Here, to link this elaboration on symbols to our interest in metaphors, according to Ricoeur (1976, p.69), ‘metaphors are the linguistic surface of symbols’. Accordingly, while a symbol represents something more than its literal interpretation, a metaphor is a figure of speech – to, in discourse, represent something as something else (to be described in subchapter 3.3). With this fresh in mind, we briefly introduce the symbolic management of strategic change.

As outlined in the previous section, strategic change was argued to include a ‘cognitive reorientation of the organizational reality’ (Gioia et al. 1994, p.363). To bring about strategic change, to alter the cognitions and actions among the recipients of change along with forging an ‘understanding and acceptance of an alternative strategic reality’ among them (Gioia et al. 1994, p.364), a key managerial activity is argued to include the manipulation of meaning through symbolic language in acts of communication (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, 1978; Reed, 1984; Siehl & Martin, 1984; Smircich, 1983a). For purpose of clarification, in the footsteps of Alvesson and Berg (1992), we make a distinction between two applications of culture and symbolism in the field of organization and management studies: symbolic management and corporate culture management. In this study, we focus on symbolic management:

“What is managed here [symbolic management] is not culture per se but symbols connected with a cultural context. Thus, symbolic management, as opposed to the corporate culture perspective [...] does not presume that organizations necessarily have a culture, and certainly not a unitary culture. What is of interest are symbols and symbolic patterns at different levels of the organization. [...] Symbolic management thus becomes a ‘management of meaning’” – Alvesson & Berg (1992, p.152)

Furthermore, from a symbolic management perspective, the role of the manager is to:

“[C]reating and managing unifying symbols that give meaning to the organizations members and impel them to take action according to the overall strategy of the organization [...] [T]he manager’s ability to create and convey a powerful and uniting symbolic representation of the company, its mission and the context in which it exists, is as important as his [sic] rational decision-making capability.” – Alvesson & Berg (1992, pp.152-153)

Here, the managerial use of discursive resources such as narratives (cf. Dunford & Jones, 2000) and metaphors (e.g. Morgan, 1986) are often argued to be particularly powerful when attempting to manage the meaning of others. Something we discuss in subchapter 3.3.

As signaled in the introductory chapter in this paper, in the literature on management of strategic change, such managerial symbolic influencing attempts are often referred to as sensegiving (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Pondy, 1978; Thayer, 1988; Whetten, 1984). A concept that, accordingly, is intimately related to the ‘management of meaning’ (cf. Smircich & Morgan, 1982). And, in addition, to ‘framing’ (cf. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). For purpose of clarification, in this study, symbolic management is used as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1969). When symbolic management is translated into managerial (symbolic) communication and action, it is understood as the management of meaning. However, when embarked on in the discourse of strategic change, we refer to it as a sensegiving. And framing is understood as a specific type of symbolic management. Concepts that we define in the next subchapter.

3.2 Sensemaking, sensegiving, sensebreaking, and change

In this subchapter, in light of the previous elaboration on strategy, change and symbolism, we introduce the concepts of sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking.

3.2.1 Sensemaking and change

In Weick’s (1995) seminal book *Sensemaking in Organizations*, he outlines a sensemaking perspective to organizational analysis. According to Weick (1995, p.16), sensemaking is to be understood literally. Hence, sensemaking means the making of sense – to make something sensible. A process that he argues is triggered by that ‘the something’, initially, in an ongoing flow of experience, makes no sense. The something is, simply, perceived to be non-sensible.

To sharpen the picture of what sensemaking is, Weick (1995) contrasts sensemaking with interpretation. Here, if understood in relation to a text, interpretation is argued to be the translation of the text in which ‘one word is explained by another’ (Weick, 1995, p.7) – to discover it. In complement, in the words of Weick (1995, p.13), sensemaking is ‘less about discovery than it is about invention’. In other words, ‘sensemaking is about authoring [text] as well as reading [it]’ (Weick, 1995, p.7). Thus, from a sensemaking perspective, ‘people discover their own inventions’ (Weick, 1995, p.15). And, according to Weick (1995, p.15), ‘the artifacts it [sensemaking] produces includes language games and text’.

Weick (1995, p.17) argues that sensemaking is a process that is:

- (1) Grounded in identity construction;
- (2) Retrospective;
- (3) Enactive of sensible environments;
- (4) Social;
- (5) Ongoing;
- (6) Focused on and by extracted cues; and
- (7) Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.

Firstly, if moving from the first-mentioned property to the last-mentioned property in the list of seven properties outlined above, sensemaking is argued to be grounded in identity construction. In the words of Weick (1995, p.18), 'sensemaking begins with a sensemaker'. In brief, he argues that how individuals define and make sense of the situation in which they find themselves depends on who they become when dealing with it – to 'define it is also to define the self' (Weick, 1995, p.20). A definition of the latter which, in addition, is said to be discursively constituted. In this process, Weick (1995) argues that individuals strive to maintain a positive (cognitive and affective), competent and consistent sense of self.

Secondly, sensemaking is retrospective. In the words of Weick (1995, p.24), 'people can know what they are doing only after they have done it'. An act in which, as previously mentioned, individuals discover their own inventions (and the sense of it). Thirdly, from a sensemaking perspective, individuals enact sensible environment. In the words of Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005, p.414), individuals 'organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact this sense back to the world to make the world more orderly'.

Fourthly, sensemaking is social. Thus, sensemaking is argued to unfold in a social context (Weick, 1995). Fifthly, sensemaking is an ongoing accomplishment, or an ongoing conversation (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking never starts because it never stops. In the words of Weick (1995, p.43), individuals are 'always in the middle of things'.

Sixthly, sensemaking is focused on and extracted by cues. Here, to make sense of the situation in which individuals find themselves, they notice and bracket textlike cues from their present moment of experience and interpret the cues by putting them in their cognitive frame of past experiences and give them a name (Weick, 1995). Seventhly, sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Here, to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity in organizations (cf. Martin & Meyerson, 1988), Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005, p.419) suggest that individuals 'search for meaning, settle for plausibility, and move on'. To hold

disparate elements together, Weick (1995, p.61) argues ‘what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story’. A story to work as a frame for sensemaking and organizing (Weick, 2012).

In sum, if represented as a sequence, the process of sensemaking is understood as:

“[P]eople concerned with identity in the context of others engage ongoing events from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, all the while enacting more or less order into those ongoing events.” – Weick (1995, p.18)

Taken together, to connect this elaboration to the previous discussion on symbols, Morgan, Frost and Pondy (1983, p.25) argues that “[t]he same symbols can mean different things to different people, because they are used to make sense of the world in different ways’.

According to Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005, p.414), and as we signaled at the beginning of this section, sensemaking is triggered ‘whenever the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world’. Accordingly, sensemaking is activated by the question: ‘same or different?’. In a literature review on sensemaking in organizations, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p.12) suggest that triggers for sensemaking in the field of research at that time could be distinguished into five broad categories:

- (1) Major planned events;
- (2) Major unplanned events;
- (3) Minor planned events;
- (4) Minor unplanned events; and
- (5) Hybrids of major/minor planned/unplanned events.

The first category, major planned events, is the category of ‘disruptive ambiguity’ that we focus on in this study. A category that includes sensemaking studies of topics in areas of strategy and organizational change, such as deliberate strategic change initiatives. Events in organizations that, in the words of Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p.12):

“[I]nterrupt common ways of accomplishing things and therefore force most organizational actors into significant sensemaking efforts concerning how to carry out their work stipulated by the planned change initiative.”

And as signaled in a previous subchapter, the impetus to embark on strategic change may be a consequence of both (perceived) external and internal pressures for change.

A key point here is, however, in the words of Starbuck (1976, in Weick, 1995, p.163) that ‘[o]rganizations’ environments are largely invented by organizations themselves’. Thus, from a sensemaking perspective, environments are more invented than discovered. Weick

(1995) makes the same argument about problems. A problem is sometimes argued to be a gap between the way things are and the way one wants it to be. Subsequently, to close the gap is to solve the problem. However, in the words of Weick (1995, p.90), ‘once something is labeled a problem, that is when the problem starts’. In other words, by the same token as above, problems are not (necessarily) ‘out there’ but an outcome of sensemaking processes.

For example, Dutton and Jackson (1987) argue that how a strategic issue is named, as a threat or as an opportunity, influence sensemaking. The ‘opportunity’ category implies a positive situation in which gains are likely and over which one has a fair amount of control. In contrast, the ‘threat’ category implies a negative situation in which loss is likely and over which one has little control. As people risk more to avoid a loss of a particular amount than they risk gaining the same amount, Dutton and Jackson (1987, p.85) suggest that if managers make threat attributes more salient, it may facilitate an internal response of larger magnitude.

3.2.2 Sensemaking, sensemaking-related constructs, and change

Now, before providing more elaborative examples of sensemaking in the context of strategic change in organizations, we introduce what Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p.69) refer to as two ‘sensemaking-related constructs’. Namely, ‘sensegiving’ and ‘sensebreaking’.

The first construct, sensegiving, has been introduced in brief but is now explored in greater depth. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p.442) define sensegiving as:

“[T]he processes of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning constructions of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality.”

In other words, while sensemaking is understood as an intra-play of cognition and action in which individuals (retrospectively) makes plausible sense of ambiguous events, sensegiving is, in contrast, understood as a process in which individuals attempt to give prospective sense to others. However, in the words of Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p.24):

“A ‘sensegiver’ is also a ‘sensemaker’, and vice versa: the two cannot be separated. A change agent who ‘gives sense’ to employees has ‘made sense’ out of sense ‘given’ to him [sic] by others. And an employee who ‘makes’ sense of change initiated by attending to her [sic] supervisors also ‘gives’ sense to them through her [sic] reactions. [...] [T]he ‘making’ and ‘giving’ of sense are simultaneously implicated in the process of sensemaking.”

Here, parallels may be drawn to what Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, pp.442-443), in the context of a deliberate strategic change initiative, refer to as an iterative, sequential and to

some extent reciprocal cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving between top management and different internal and external stakeholder groups of the organization. A cycle, or process, of ‘negotiated social [re]construction [of the organizational reality]’ (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p.434; ‘organizational sensemaking processes’, Maitlis, 2005).

However, realistically speaking, as Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) and scholarly others (e.g. Brown, Colville & Pye, 2015; Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) remind us about, some powerful groups in the organization (e.g. the upper echelon) may be argued to hold an unequally strong position to influence the construction of social reality. For example, according to Smircich and Morgan (1982), control over which cues that serve as a legitimate point of reference, and its criteria for selection, is a key source of power. Here, parallels may be drawn to what Deetz (1992) refers to as ‘discursive closure’ and/or what Brown (2004), by the same token, refers to as dominant or hegemonic stories.

Furthermore, the process of sensemaking and sensegiving is not only something that comes about between hierarchical levels of the organization, but at any level by any actor, acting within or outside the formal boundaries of the organization (e.g. Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Further, and as hinted in the discussion above, some scholars argue that it cannot be taken for granted that the ‘change recipient sensemaking’ (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), and/or what Bartunek et al. (2006) refer to as the sensemaking of the ‘receiving end’, make the same sense of the sensegiving attempts as the sender. For example, in the words of Sonenshein (2010, p.503):

“It is assumed that meaning is a function of how managers transfer an interpretive reality to employees. Accordingly, scholars have not focused enough attention on understanding how employees embellish these meanings of change [...]. [A]lthough managers use discourse to exercise influence over employees during change implementation, employees also have some agency to construct their own meanings that deviate from those of managers [...]. As a result, the managerial narrative of change is only one account of ‘what really happened’, as a number of narratives co-exist and compete to be heard.”

An argument that is echoed in a quote by Corvellec and Risberg (2007, p.322), ‘we object to such a sender-centred view of sense [...], it is non-sensical to speak of sense without referring to interpretation and, thus, to a living audience’. Thus, in the words of Bartunek et al. (1999, p.67), ‘achieving acceptance of a vision is likely to be a complex process that involves multiple, perhaps conflicting, and evolving understandings’. In other words, ‘what is plausible for one group, such as managers, often proves implausible for another group,

such as employees' (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.415). Further, in addition, some scholars have illustrated that there may be gaps in understanding of organizational change among managers as well (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Now, after having discussed sensegiving, we introduce another sensemaking-related construct: sensebreaking. Here, somewhat simplified, while sensemaking involves making meaning and sensegiving involves giving meaning to others, Pratt (2000, p.464) argues that:

“[S]ensebreaking involves the destruction or breaking down of meaning.”

Further, alike the sensemaking and sensegiving cycle outlined before (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), Pratt (2000) suggests a cycle of sensegiving and sensebreaking. Here, captured in the words of Mantere, Schildt and Sillince (2012, p.174):

“Managers do not merely communicate new meaning during times of change. They may also intentionally undermine existing organizational meaning to clear the way of change. [...] The intent of sensebreaking is to create a meaning void in its recipient. Such a state increases receptiveness to managerial sensegiving.”

In other words, ‘sensegiving imperatives’ (Corley & Gioia, 2004) and/or ‘sensegiving gaps’ (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007), are not merely discovered – but constructed. Thus, it may be argued that sometimes the ambiguity and uncertainty talks for itself and, subsequently, spur an atmosphere of crisis and a need for change. And sometimes (managerial) others have to do the talking, by giving ‘what is’ a different face (Thayer, 1988). Here, parallels may be drawn to what Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p.446) refer to as ‘ambiguity-by-design’.

3.2.3 Sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking in the organization

Now, after having introduced and discussed the concepts of sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking, we provide some illustrative examples. As we are interested in exploring sensemaking and sensemaking-related constructs among organizational members along three hierarchical levels (i.e. top management, middle management and co-workers) in the context of a strategic change process, the examples below are organized accordingly. As we studied a deliberate strategic change initiative, top management is understood as the primary senders, middle management as both receivers and senders, and co-workers as end receivers. The final illustration includes all three hierarchical levels. Here, in addition, to bridge this subchapter with the upcoming subchapter on metaphors, we clarify its connection.

As signaled previously, the bulk of research literature on both strategic management and change management suffer from a bias towards the perspective of the top management and/or the change agents, neglecting the perspective of middle management in general (cf. Balogun, 2003) and co-workers in particular (Bartunek et al. 1999). And, as signaled in a previous subchapter, mainstream literature often adopts a ‘resistance lens’ to organizational others in the context of change implementation (cf. Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008). Before elaborating on the views and roles of middle management and co-workers, we briefly outline how top management sometimes is portrayed in strategic change work.

According to Gioia et al. (1994), in the context of embarking on deliberate strategic change, the aim of top management is to forge a shared understanding and an acceptance of an alternative strategic reality in the heads and hearts of the change recipients. Here, they argue that three key concepts are: influence (or sensegiving), sensemaking and symbolism. Further, here, and in a previous article (i.e. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), they argue that the effectiveness of change relies on a set of (symbolic) managerial activities. Activities such as, in addition to ‘substantive’ actions, crafting and communicating an overarching vision to the change recipients (i.e. a new interpretive scheme) – a present versus a future image.

Furthermore, in a more recent article on symbolic management of strategic change, Fiss and Zajac (2006) put two forms of symbolic management under their loupe: ‘framing’ and ‘decoupling’. The latter form, decoupling, refers to a situation in which compliance with external or internal expectations, for legitimation purposes, are merely symbolic rather than substantive (Power, 1999). In other words, representations are decoupled from practice.

The other form of symbolic management elaborated on by Fiss and Zajac (2006) is framing, which may be understood as an answer to or definition of ‘what is going on’ and/or ‘should be going on’ in a situation. According to Entman (1993, p.52), to frame is to:

“[S]elect some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”

In other words, framing is understood as selectively highlighting some elements of an issue while, by the same act, hiding others (cf. ‘sensehiding’, in Maitlis & Christianson, 2015). By defining the situation in a particular way, the ‘sensegiver’ enact a particular version of reality to others as some cues are highlighted while others are suppressed (cf. Weick, 1995).

From a middle management perspective, Balogun (2003, p.69) suggests that middle managers fulfil a complex change intermediary position. In her study, she shows how middle managers juggled four inter-related roles during a process of top-down implementation of strategic change: undertaking personal changes (e.g. roles/responsibilities), helping others through change (e.g. sensegiving, role modeling, coaching and handling resistance), keeping the business going (i.e. ‘business as usual’), and implementing changes (e.g. new working practices and cost reductions). In other words, the sense given by top management was said to have become input in the middle managers’ sensemaking which, in turn, was argued to inform the way in which they, among other things, helped others through change (see also McDermott, Fitzgerald & Buchanan, 2013; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

However, and as we hinted in the previous section, sensemaking processes are social (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Balogun (2003) noticed that middle managers did not only extract cues along vertical levels through formal and informal interaction with top management, but negotiated meanings with other middle managers in ongoing, day-to-day interactions as well. An argument she and a colleague developed in a later article series and labeled ‘inter-recipient sensemaking’ (cf. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; 2005).

Furthermore, Balogun (2003) highlighted some of the perceived struggles among the middle management in the context of the strategic change implementation and arranged them under the category of ‘organizational constraints’. Here, she argued that constraints such as high workload, lack of time and support led to a role conflict between visible aspects of their work and less tangible aspects of their role (i.e. the sensemaker role). To resolve this conflict, the managers had to select where to focus their attention and ‘a focus on coordination was at the expense of interpretation and translation tasks’ (Balogun, 2003, p.80).

While Weick (1995, p.70) argues that ‘people create their own constraints’ and locates sensemaking in the mind and in language, scholars have in recent years begun to emphasize the sense made through the ‘totality of experience’ (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). In other words, to take the (socio)materiality in the sensemaking process more seriously (e.g. Brown, Colville & Pye, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

After having elaborated on how the roles of top management and middle management sometimes are portrayed in the literature on the management of strategic change, we turn the limelight to the receiving end – the co-workers. Here, if limited scholarly attention has been paid to the meaning-making of middle managers in change work (Balogun, 2003), even less

scholarly attention has been paid to the meaning-making of individuals in non-managerial positions (e.g. George & Jones, 2001). And if limited scholarly attention has been paid to the cognitive dimensions of middle managers and co-workers in general, even less scholarly attention has been paid to the emotional dimension among recipients in change work (e.g. Smollan, 2014; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). In this study, we aim to address both.

Bartunek et al. (2006) studied a change initiative from the change recipients' point of view, which included an exploration of their sensemaking about the organizational change through their ascribed meanings, emotional responses, and perceptions of its impact on them. In their conceptual model, in which participation in the change initiative was the antecedent variable and the perceived gains (and losses) the outcome variable, the mediating variables were the emotional experience (i.e. pleasantness and arousal) and meaning-making. In terms of the latter variable, three categories of meanings had 'emerged' in their empirical material: (1) Alignment in meaning, (2) Perceptions of misalignment or contradictions in meanings, and (3) Perceived personal impact of the change initiative.

Here, in the words of Bartunek et al. (2006, pp.201-202):

“This perception [category 1 and 2] has less impact on the perceived gains and losses from the change than does the personal impact, in this case, the extra work the change initiative required of change recipients on top of their regular duties, which affected all the perceived gains.”

In other words, while Bartunek et al. (2006) argue that it was important with alignment in meanings between the change agents' intent and the change recipients' perceptions, and that it was important with consistency in how the change initiative was presented and enacted (i.e. to walk the talk), the perceptions that the change caused a negative personal impact – in the form of increased workload – affected the experienced gains and losses of change among the change recipients more than any other category of meaning. Highlighting, we argue, alike the elaboration on organizational constraints in middle managerial change work as hinted previously, some of the limits of the management of meaning – as, if put in its sociomaterial context (cf. Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), it is not always possible to act on such understanding.

Now, as a summarizing illustration of this subchapter, we present some of the findings from an article in which a strategic change implementation (initiated by top management) was studied from a narrative and sensemaking lens. And, in addition, took the perspective

of both change agents/intermediaries/recipients (i.e. middle managers) and end receivers (i.e. co-workers) seriously. An article much in line with the project we embarked on.

In Sonenshein's (2010) article, he argues that the predominant models on management of change remain rooted in Lewin's (1947) three phase model of planned change. Here, if dressed in the sensemaking vocabulary discussed in considerable depth in this chapter, from a cognitive approach to the Lewinian model of change, strategic change involves breaking down negative meanings (i.e. sensebreaking-unfreezing), giving new positive meanings (i.e. sensegiving-moving), and reifying these new meanings (sensemaking-freeze). Sonenshein (2010) outline two limitations of this perspective. Firstly, that studies in change management tend to be preoccupied with only certain types of (positive-negative) meanings constructed by managers and co-workers (cf. 'the [problem] gap must matter', in Weick, 1995, p.89). Secondly, he argues, and as signaled previously in this chapter, that this paradigm of change overlooks the cognitions and actions (and emotions) of the recipients of change.

Following Gergen and Gergen (1997), Sonenshein (2010) adopted a narrative lens to make sense of his findings. Here, he argued that the managers and the co-workers narrated the change in different ways – both within the groups and between the two groups (to be explored on the upcoming page). Sonenshein (2010, p.480) defined a narrative as:

“A discursive construction that actors use as a tool to shape their own understanding (sense-making), as a tool to influence others' understandings (sensegiving), and as an outcome of the collective construction of meaning.”

According to Sonenshein (2010), managers narrated both the change as significant and insignificant, but always positive (rather than negative). If constructing the strategic change as significant/positive, he argued that they used a 'progressive narrative' (i.e. a move to a better state). And if constructing it as insignificant/positive, the managers used a 'stability narrative' (i.e. preserving the status quo). However, what Sonenshein (2010) argued to be puzzling, was that all but one managers' discourse contained both types of narratives. A dual construction of change and continuity, or novelty and familiarity, that he argued could be understood as purposeful, strategic ambiguity (cf. Eisenberg, 1984; Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012). In other words, the use of equivocal discourse, the blend of narratives of stability and progression, suggested that 'managers hedge their bets by being strategically ambiguous to balance the need to promote change while reducing uncertainty' (Sonenshein, 2010, p.499).

Furthermore, when including the voices of the end receivers, Sonenshein (2010) found that the co-workers' narratives about the strategic change process did not only vary along the dimension of significant-insignificant (as the middle managers), but along the dimension of positive-negative as well (i.e. beneficial/desirable versus detrimental/undesirable). Alike the managers who constructed it as insignificant/positive, the co-workers that constructed it as insignificant/positive and insignificant/negative were argued to use a stability narrative. However, given the added interpretive dimension, the managerial attempts to freeze the co-workers' meanings were embellished and, in turn, either led to a positively and/or negatively constructed status quo (Sonenshein, 2010). If the co-workers were satisfied with the status quo, they constructed positive narratives (change accepting). But if they were dissatisfied with the status quo, they constructed negative narratives (change resisting).

Further, alike the managers who constructed the change as significant/positive, the co-workers that constructed it as significant/positive were argued to use a progressive narrative as well (change championing/change accepting). However, by the same token as above, the managerial attempts to unfreeze the co-workers' meanings were embellished and, in turn, also led to a negatively constructed new direction. Here, Sonenshein (2010) argued that they used a 'regressive narrative'. In other words, the co-workers who were dissatisfied with the new direction narrated the change as if the organization was 'moving' to a lesser state. Thus, unlike the stability narrative (status quo), both the progressive and the regressive narrative constructed change as significant (transformational), but the narratives differed along the evaluative dimension of positive or negative.

On the next page, Sonenshein's (2010, p.500) model is illustrated (our interpretation). In addition to the elements discussed, he argued that the co-worker's sensemaking (the funnel, central triangle) was influenced by the period (i.e. the phase of change) and the local context (i.e. locations and/or settings) as well.

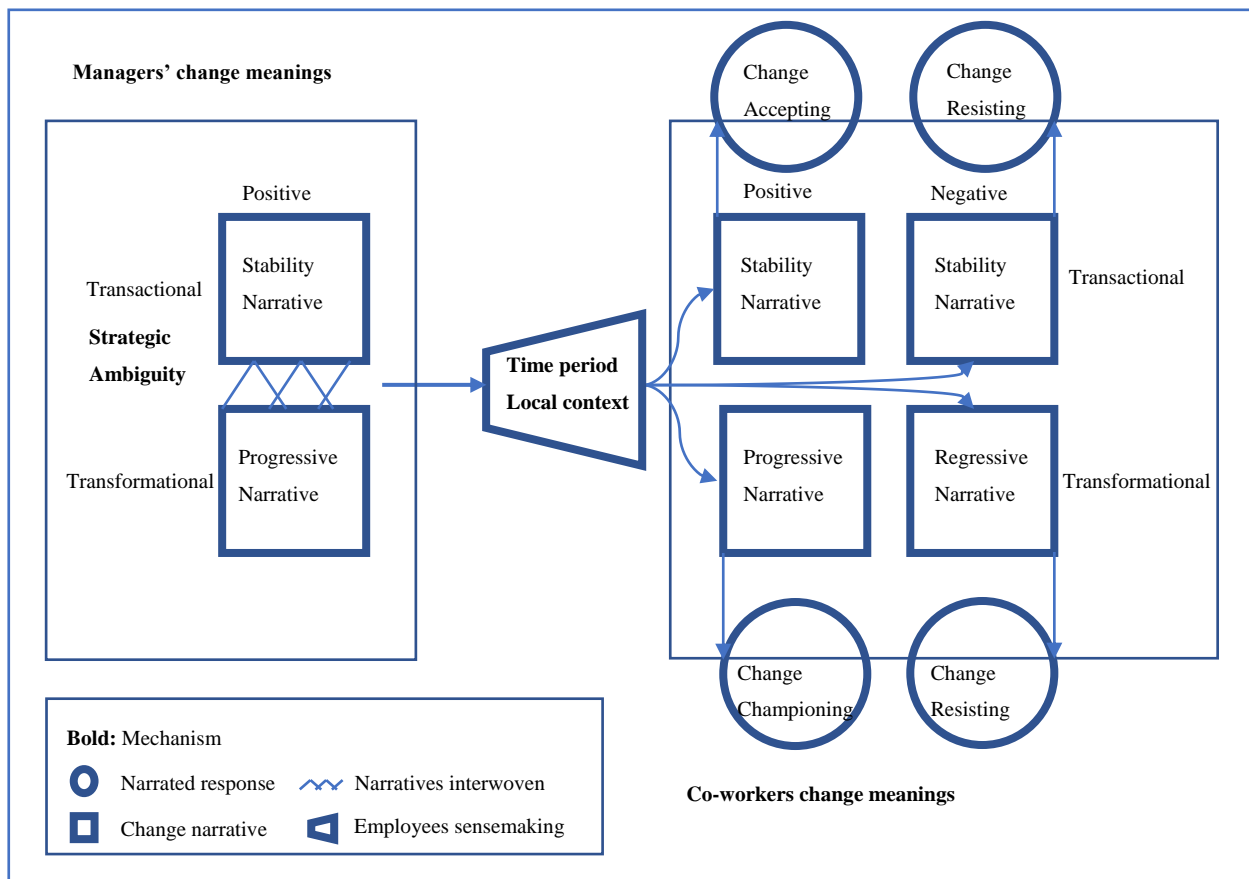


Figure 2. Summary of how narratives influence change implementation, Sonenshein (2010, p.500)

Now, before moving on to the next subchapter, to link this elaboration on sensemaking, sensegiving, sensebreaking, narratives and strategic change to our interest in metaphors, a quote by Pondy (1983, pp. 163-164) may help to clarify our understanding:

“A function of metaphor [...] is that of bridging from the familiar to the strange, of facilitating change. [...] The metaphor provides a road map in strange territories. [...] Because of its inherent ambivalence of meaning, metaphor can fulfil the dual function of enabling change and preserving continuity.”

And Pondy (1983, p.165) continues with, when answering the question of why the use of metaphors is a powerful tool to facilitate change in organizations:

“[L]iteral (i.e. non-metaphorical) attempts to talk about change sacrifice tradition, and literal attempts to preserve tradition blocks change, but metaphor can express both change and tradition, both novelty and familiarity.”

An argument which is echoed in the following quote by Gioia et al. (1994, p.365):

“When people are called upon to enact some change in their existing patterns of thinking and acting, the proposed change must make sense in a way that relates to previous understandings and experiences [...]. Symbols and metaphors are key to this process, in part because their inherent ambiguity provides a bridge between the familiar and the strange, thus fostering a sense of continuity while simultaneously facilitating change [...]. In this sense, symbols both conceal and reveal facets of change. They conceal threatening aspects within the camouflage of the known [...], yet reveal those aspects that emphasize difference; but, differences are rendered in terms that echo the familiar.”

And in a more recent article by Gioia, Nag and Corley (2012, p.370), in which they argue that ‘visionary ambiguity’ is critical for effective implementation of strategic change, the use of metaphorical language is framed as a persuasive device:

“Visionary ambiguity can assume a number of ‘locations’. It is most obviously located in the expression of the vision itself – in the form of metaphorical language, with its lack of specific details [...]. The key to finding common ground between these sensemaking and sensegiving disparities lies in creating a visionary symbol with adequate interpretive leeway.”

In other words, to connect these insights to Sonenshein’s (2010) model outlined before, it seems as if metaphors may embody the same function in managerial discourse in change work as the interwoven narratives of stability and progression. To, in the words of Geertz (1973, p.93), ‘serve both as models of the situation and models for the situation’.

Furthermore, according to Pondy (1983, p.163), a second function of metaphor, which may be argued to further reinforce the idea that they may be powerful tools in the ‘hands’ of management (Greve, 2017), is that ‘they place explanation beyond doubt and argumentation’ by resort to fantasy. As metaphors belong to the level of symbolic reality, it is neither subject to the rules of logic nor empirically falsifiable. They simply ‘are’.

In addition, metaphors, alike narratives, embodies both cognitions and emotions. But, in organizational analysis, the latter is often overlooked (e.g. Smollan, 2014). In light of our research interest, and given the positive-negative dimension in Sonenshein’s (2010) model, it seems as if an exploration of metaphors in the discourse of strategic change among both change agents and change recipients may provide a plausible resort to unpack and develop a better understanding of the discursive, cognitive and emotional dimensions of the symbolic management of strategic change. And, in addition, to move beyond the level of text and the level of meaning (and emotions) to the somewhat unexplored level of (metaphor in) practice.

3.3 Metaphor

This subchapter, which is the last part of this chapter, is organized into three sections. Firstly, we discuss metaphors in organizational analysis in general (hence, extending the previous elaboration made on metaphors in the chapter on methodology and method). Secondly, we discuss metaphors as a lens to analyze and understand organizational change. Thirdly, and lastly, we discuss the use and misuse of managerial metaphor in the symbolic management of strategic change (thus, extending the previous elaboration on the management of meaning by focusing specifically on managerial metaphor in the context of change).

3.3.1 Metaphor and organizations

A metaphor is a linguistic artifact, one of four ‘master tropes’ (Burke, 1941), that since the 1980s have received a lot of attention in organizational analysis (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Grant & Osrick, 1996). This as metaphors are said to be important organizing devices in talking and making sense of life in general (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ricoeur, 1978) and, it seems, in organizational life in particular (e.g. Morgan, 1980; Örténblad, Trehan & Putnam, 2017). In addition, due to their generative potential (Schön, 1979). As captured by Morgan (1986, p.341), metaphors potential of making us ‘see, think, and act in new ways’.

In organizational analysis, and as hinted in previous subchapters, the machine and the organism root metaphors of the organization have dominated the literature (Morgan, 1980). However, these have been followed by a proliferation of metaphors, grounded in different knowledge interests and philosophical assumptions (cf. Palmer & Dunford, 1996), including cultures, political systems and psychic prisons (e.g. Morgan, 1986), among other things. When applied to understand particular organizational practices, metaphors have, to mention a few, been used as a vehicle for making sense of management (e.g. Morgan, 1993), culture (e.g. Alvesson, 1993a), identity (e.g. Alvesson, 2010), leadership (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2011), organizational development and change (e.g. Osrick & Grant, 1996a), and agents of change (e.g. Akin & Palmer, 2000; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017).

For purpose of clarification, we understand metaphor as a way of seeing an object as if it was something else, thereby the metaphor provides a cognitive bridge (or map) between two dissimilar domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In the theory of conceptual metaphor (cf. Lakoff, 1993), the metaphor is the map (A is B), while the object that is seen as something

else (A as B) is referred to as the ‘target domain’ (A), and the something else is referred to as the ‘source domain’ (B). To be exemplified in the next sections.

3.3.2 A nomothetic/deductive approach to metaphor, change, and management

As hinted in the previous chapter on methodology and method, following Oswick and Grant (1996b) and others (e.g. Steen, 2007; Örtenblad, 2017), we here make a distinction between what may be referred to as metaphors of organizations and metaphors in organizations. In other words, the former category includes metaphors suggested by the researcher to analyze and make sense of organizational phenomena (i.e. nomothetic/inductive approach). While, in contrast, the latter category includes metaphors used by the organizational members being studied (i.e. ideographic/inductive approach). In this second section, we focus on metaphors of organizational change. While, in the next section, we focus on metaphors in organizational change. Later, in the upcoming chapters, as signaled previously as well, we use metaphors both as a vehicle to explore organizational change and as an empirical phenomenon in itself.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.99), the journey metaphor lies at the heart of Western culture – embodying notions of progress, purpose and direction. A metaphor that, as well, is said to be the root metaphor (Pepper, 1935), or paradigm (Kuhn, 1962), of change in organizations (e.g. Inns, 1996; Morgan, 1988). In other words, change (target domain) is seen as a journey (source domain). Here, in an attempt to make the strange more familiar, it is structured by a culturally shared and (more) clearly delineated understanding of another ‘object’ (cf. Koch & Deetz, 1981). As captured in a quote by Cornelissen (2012, p.125):

“The cognitive function refers to the use of metaphors as a resource for helping [individuals] describe, order, and make sense of an abstract or complex situation.”

In a widely cited article, Marshak (1993b) argues that there appear to be two dominant interpretations of the journey metaphor in the research field of organizational change and development (labelled diagnostic and dialogic approaches to change, in Bushe & Marshak, 2009; e.g. Sackmann, 1989). According to Inns (1996, p.21), when paraphrasing Marshak (1993b), the two interpretations may be understood as follows (our summary):

- (1) The first perspective, termed the destination-oriented journey, constructs the journey as a departure from a known place, with an intention to travel a fixed distance and arrive at a pre-defined end destination, measuring steps and progress on the way (cf. ‘n-step models of change’, Kotter, 1996; ‘unfreezing, moving, and freezing’, in Lewin, 1947, p.34).

- (2) The second perspective, termed the process-oriented journey, views, in contrast, the journey as an essentially explorative process. In other words, the journey does neither have any clear ending nor beginning – nor direction (cf. ‘cyclical model of change’, in Marshak, 1993b; ‘organizational becoming’, in Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Marshak’s (1993b) study, we argue, is a telling example of how one and the same root metaphor may be constructed in different ways (cf. Alvesson, 2013b). Accordingly, and as signaled in the previous chapter, a refined understanding of, for example, strategic change in organizations, may not only be facilitated by using different metaphors as lenses of inquiry (cf. ‘coloured lenses to see organizations through’, Örténblad, 2017), but also by exploring the metaphors behind the metaphor, the second-level metaphors (cf. Alvesson, 1993b).

Further, following Cornelissen et al. (2008) and others (e.g. Lakoff, 1993; Oswick & Grant, 1996b), the use of metaphor in organizational analysis also opens up for deeper, more sophisticated forms of second-order comparisons. In the words of Mangham (1996, p.26), paraphrasing Lakoff (1993, p. 206), ‘these [ontological] correspondences [to understand one domain of experience in terms of another] permit us to reason about organizations using the knowledge we use to reason about journeys’. Or, as in our case, to reason about change using the knowledge we use to reason about journeys (e.g. purposes as destinations, organizational members as travelers, challenges as obstacles, and so on).

However, such extensions of metaphors have received some criticism. For example, Miles and Huberman (1994, p.252) advise the researcher to know when to ‘stop pressing the metaphor for its juice’, to overmetaphorize. And Akin and Palmer (2000, p.70) advise the practitioner (change agents) to sidestep the trap of ‘overextending the metaphor’. However, while acknowledging the potential problems and pitfalls of (over)extending the metaphor, the criticism is raised by scholars working along different ontological and epistemological assumptions than ours. In other words, while they embark on positivist virtues (e.g. internal validity, literal language), we argue that such an approach tends to (fore)close the empirical material, instead of opening it up for alternative readings (for a discussion on ‘conflicting uses of metaphors’, e.g. Palmer & Dunford, 1996).

Furthermore, in another article, Marshak (1993a) suggests four metaphors of change:

- (1) Fix and maintain. Here, change is equated with that something is broke or maintained poorly (i.e. change to preserve the status quo, ‘freeze’, in Lewin, 1947).
- (2) Developmental. Here, change is equated with building and develop capabilities (e.g. the learning organization, and/or continuous development, Senge, 1990).

- (3) Transitional (or relocate). Here, change is equated with moving from one state to another (e.g. ‘change within the system’, in Bartunek & Moch, 1987).
- (4) Transformational (or liberate and recreate). Here, change, unlike the former type, involves a movement. However, in contrast, the movement is an alteration in the way of being, not just a transition from A to B (e.g. ‘changing the system itself’, in Bartunek & Moch, 1987).

Further, Marshak (1993b) and others (e.g. Akin & Palmer, 2000) argue that not only change may be conceptualized in metaphorical terms – but the change agents as well. Dependent on the metaphor of change, Marshak (1993a) argues that the change agent may, for example, be portrayed as a mechanic (fix and maintain), coach (developmental), guide (transitional), or visionary (transformational). In addition, in Marshak’s (1993a) article, he argues that to understand, use and align metaphors of change is a critical competency for change agents.

For example, he argues that the use of metaphors may serve three interrelated functions in change work (see also, Broussine & Vince, 1996; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Marshak, 1996; Morgan, 1993; Woodman, 2008; Simsek, 1997). Firstly, the change agent may use metaphors as a tool for diagnosis to get a better understanding of the organization’s state of affairs (i.e. to be attentive to how things are metaphorically theorized in discourse among its members). Secondly, in light of the ‘findings’ from the diagnosis, the change agent may try to align the language used by herself and organizational others with the managerial metaphor of change. For example, if the organization embarks on a transitional change – a move from A to B – Marshak (1993a) suggests that phrases such as ‘keep moving forward’, ‘stay on course’ and ‘leave the old behind’ may be used to paint a consistent image of change.

Thirdly, and linked to the two functions mentioned previously, if the change agents and/or the change recipients would use incongruent metaphorical language in relation to the intended change, Marshak (1993a) argues that it leads to confusion and failure. However, as hinted in the previous subchapter, clarity is perhaps, in sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom, not a virtue in change work (e.g. Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012; Sonenshein, 2010).

3.3.3 An ideographic/inductive approach to metaphor, change, and management

Now, after having discussed the use of metaphors in organizational analysis in general and in the context of change in particular, we develop the elaboration on metaphors in change work by approaching them as an empirical phenomenon – rather than only as an analytical lens – and, in addition, we build on the previous discussion (see section 3.2.3) on metaphor as a managerial sensegiving device as part of the symbolic management of strategic change.

As described previously, in the words of Pondy (1983, p.164), ‘metaphors facilitate change by making the strange familiar’. In other words, due to their ambivalence in meaning, ‘metaphor can fulfill the dual function of enabling change and preserving continuity’ (Pondy, 1983, p.164). Further, the power of metaphor is also said to lie in its generative potential, to ‘make us see, think, and act in new ways’ (Morgan, 1986, p.341). The richer the vocabulary, the richer the imaginary, and, thus, the richer the repertoire for action. In the words of Weick:

“The more general point is that vivid words draw attention to new possibilities (Pondy, 1978), suggesting that organizations with access to more varied images will engage in sensemaking that is more adaptive than will organizations with more limited vocabularies.” (1995, p.4)

And, with specific reference to the role of management, in the words of Pfeffer (1981, p.25):

“[If] the task of management [is] to provide explanations, rationalizations, and legitimation for the activities undertaken in the organization [rather than enacting substantive action per se], [...] then [symbolic] language [and action] is a vehicle through which such rationalizations occur. [...] And if organizations are [socially constructed] systems of shared meanings and beliefs, the [managerial] use of language is important.”

Further, and as hinted in the previous subchapter as well, Cornelissen (2012, p.131) argues that ‘metaphors form an important basis for frame- and narrative-based accounts of sensemaking’. In other words, metaphors do not only order and/or hold together individual sensemaking accounts but, in tandem, defines the situation in a particular way (framing) and prescribe a particular (future) course of action in light of the ‘what is’ and ‘what have been’ (narration) (Cornelissen, 2012, p.119; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Fairhurst, 2011).

In other words, and on the backdrop of the theoretical and empirical clues outlined in this somewhat wide review of the literature, language and symbolic action in general and, perhaps, managerial metaphor in particular, seem to matter. In the rest of this section, which is the last part of this chapter, we provide some illustrative examples of metaphors in change work. Firstly, metaphors as a discursive tool to understand both the cognitive and emotional experiences of change. Secondly, the use of managerial metaphor in change work. Thirdly, and lastly, some of the problems, pitfalls and limitations of metaphors as a managerial tool.

In a qualitative case study, Argaman (2007; 2008) explored a top-down organizational change process through a discursive lens. Specifically, he investigated how a top managerial metaphor – change as a boat – was theorized in discourse among change recipients. Here, he found a variation in how the metaphors were constructed. For example, instead of referring

to a boat, some referred to a ship (i.e. a bigger boat). And while the top managerial metaphor (labeled the ‘official voice’ in the article by the researcher) embodied only one boat, some of his informants referred to many boats, stormy seas, safe shores, and sunken boats. Further, the metaphor was also varied through adding elements in the image, such as a crew of sailors.

In light of these findings, Argaman (2008) argued that the (internal) variation in how the managerial metaphor was theorized in discourse among the change recipients mediated the voice of the individuals (see also Cornelissen, 2012; Prasad & Prasad, 2000). In another article on how a specific metaphor may be constructed differently, Riad (2011, p.375) argued that its meanings and its performative effects are shaped by the story in which it is grounded. In other words, to connect this elaboration and Sonenshein’s (2010) article as presented in the previous subchapter, the same metaphor (e.g. change as a journey) may depending on the story, or narrative (e.g. progressive or regressive), be employed towards different ends. To change the story (context) is to change the meanings and the effects of the metaphor (text) (e.g. ‘management of change as management of conversations’, Ford & Ford, 1995).

Furthermore, to turn the limelight to the frequently neglected emotional dimension in sensemaking in general (cf. Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013) and, in particular, in change work (cf. Bartunek et al. 2006; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012), some literature suggests that putting the metaphors from the field under the loupe (i.e. ideographic/inductive approach) may be a plausible strategy to develop a better understanding of this dimension as well. For example, in the words of Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik and Alberts (2006, p.177) when exploring emotionally-laden narratives of workplace bullying:

“Metaphorical imagery is a powerful tool for analyzing emotions of work life.”

Further, in one of fairly few articles on the topic of metaphors, organizational change and emotions (for two exceptions, e.g. Barner, 2008; Vince & Broussine, 1996), Smollan (2014, p.794) argues that ‘participants in organizational change use metaphors in discourse as means of sensemaking, since they [the metaphors] provide insights into ways of thinking and feeling about organizational change that are not as easily or as graphically captured by more conventional [literal] language’. For example, the two dominant metaphors in use by his informants (and/or inferred by the author) in the discourse of change were:

- The (emotional) rollercoaster (i.e. ‘up and down movement’). Here, the metaphor was said to reflect an ambivalent movement between positive and negative emotions and experiences. From excitement and enthusiasm, to anxiety, sadness and disappointment, and vice versa.
- The grief cycle. Here, the metaphor was argued to reflect negative emotions over time that ended up with an acceptance of a new status quo (e.g. ‘denial, anger, acceptance, etc’).

In addition, in the source domains of journeys and boats, the informants used metaphors such as ‘abandoned ships’ (e.g. loss) and ‘drowning’ (e.g. loss of control) (Smollan, 2014, p.798).

In sum, in light of Smollan’s (2014) article, it seems as if being attentive to the use of metaphors may provide some clues to ‘uncover’ the emotional experience of organizational change. In addition, in light of the findings and suggestions by Alvesson (1993b), Argaman (2008) and Sonenshein (2010) as outlined previously in this chapter, to bring about a better understanding of how change agents and change recipients make sense of change (including both the cognitive and emotional experience) may not only be facilitated by exploring how different metaphors (or narratives) are theorized in discourse, but how a specific managerial metaphor (e.g. change as a journey) is theorized in discourse – to unpack its second-level structuring and idiosyncratic variations (i.e. ‘to play with the metaphors’).

However, for purpose of clarification, and in line with our somewhat suspicious stance to language and our ambiguity-centred view of life in organizations (cf. Martin & Meyerson, 1988), we find that a word of caution is in order before proceeding. The use of metaphor in discourse may be loosely coupled with the level of meaning and emotions. For example, its use may be a consequence of institutionalized scripts (e.g. Cornelissen, 2012), sexy signifiers (e.g. Cluley, 2013) and/or unreflectively (e.g. ‘dead metaphor’, in Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In addition, if (un)coupling the intention, the act and the outcome (e.g. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017), we argue, might open up for a richer picture of what might be going on.

Now, after having argued that metaphors may, given some critical reflection (e.g. ‘a reflexive approach to studying organizational metaphors’, Palmer & Dunford, 1996, p.711), be a powerful tool to unpack the cognitive and emotional experiences of change, we provide some illustrative examples of managerial metaphor in use (as a sensegiving device as part of the symbolic management of change). While, in tandem, highlighting some of its potential problems, pitfalls and limitations.

In an article on the role of analogy (i.e. a comparison between one thing and another) and metaphor in the framing and legitimization of strategic change, Cornelissen, Holt and

Zundel (2011) suggested four propositions that aimed to explain how and when analogy and metaphor-based framing of a change was likely to secure support and legitimacy from key stakeholders of the organization. Firstly, they theorized two mediating variables in terms of the persuasiveness of the frame, in which the framing was the independent variable and the legitimization (and/or justification) the dependent variable. As follows (our summary):

- (1) If the framing is consistent with the scope of the change, the strategic change is more likely to be considered as legitimate by stakeholders (i.e. analogy-based framing – additive change, metaphor-based framing – substantive change, breaking from the past).
- (2) If the framing that is used consists of relational/structural as opposed to attribute/superficial analogies and metaphors, the strategic change is more likely to be considered legitimate by the stakeholders (e.g. ‘change as a journey’).

Furthermore, in addition to these mediating variables, Cornelissen, Holt and Zundel (2011) theorized two moderating variables. As follows (our summary):

- (3) The more (or less) the frames are taken for granted and culturally familiar to the stakeholders, the higher (or lower) is the ascribed legitimacy.
- (4) The more (or less) the frames are connected with the prior and salient motives (e.g. interests and beliefs) of the stakeholders, the higher (or lower) is the ascribed legitimacy.

In other words, Cornelissen, Holt and Zundel (2011, p.1712) argue that the effectiveness and use of metaphor (and analogies) are ‘constrained’ by some organizational conditions.

An argument echoed in Greenberg’s (1995) article on sensegiving and sensemaking, in which management used a superficial analogy (see proposition 2) that was argued to have hindered – or constrained – the sensemaking of the change recipients, rather than provided guidance and direction. Here, while Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p.445) reported that ‘[the] symbol took on a life of its own and became a more powerful guiding image than he [the top manager] ever could have imagined’, the outcome was said to be the complete opposite in the article by Greenberg (1995). Here, the symbol ‘took a life of its own’, but was argued to have led to unintended outcomes due to the managers’ (in)actions (Greenberg, 1995, p.205).

However, some scholars question the whole idea of being able to control the meanings of managerial metaphor in a top-down, instrumental fashion (e.g. Koch & Deetz, 1981). For example, in the context of calling for a more realistic approach to the management of change above and beyond ‘a fantasy view of people at work’, Sinclair (1994, p.33) argues that ‘the [managerial] manipulation of metaphor to allure individuals [the receiving end] and bring them on board [the boat?]’ seldom plays out as intended in practice.

Furthermore, and as hinted in the previous subchapter, some more critically-oriented scholars highlight the power relations embedded in organizational discourse. For example, while multiple, co-existing narratives, stories and metaphors compete to be heard, Dawson and Buchanan (2005, p.852) suggests that the dominant story or official version of change may ‘largely reflect the political positioning of certain key individuals and groups within an organization, rather than serving as an accurate account of how the change [...] took place’. Here, according to Dunford and Palmer (1996, p.101), ‘counter metaphors’ may function as discursive tools to debunk or, at least, open up for alternative ways of thinking and acting, if given a voice (for a critical, metaphor-infused reading of mainstream change management literature, see Reissner, Pagan & Smith, 2011).

Now, as summarizing illustrations of this subchapter, we present some of the findings from two qualitative case studies in which managerial metaphors were studied in the context of the management of strategic change. Articles much in line with the project we embarked on. From a cultural-critical approach towards metaphor analysis, Morgan (2001) put middle managers’ change discourse under the loupe. Top management called for transformational change along the slogan of ‘get out of the box’, and the middle managers were expected to implement the top down change programme which, ironically, entailed a flip in the structure of the organization – from a top-down to a bottom-up way of conducting business.

However, while middle management reported to have understood that top management wanted to achieve transformational change, Morgan (2001) argued that there appeared to be a gap between ‘what ought to be done’ and to make it happen, as the (ambiguous) slogan to ‘get out of the box’ had come with limited explanation and/or direction. And as the middle managers were said to have failed to engage in dialogue about its meaning, Morgan (2001) argued that underlying, divergent viewpoints among them had not surfaced and, by the same token, the term had not been filled with local, shared meanings. Further, following Marshak (1993a), she also noticed that the middle managers were ‘trapped’ in a transitional metaphor of change (i.e. ‘moving forward’, ‘stay on course’), rather than drawing discursive resources from the interpretive repertoire from the intended metaphor of change (i.e. transformational).

Furthermore, which may be said to be one of the key points in her argument, Morgan (2001) argued that both the (hegemonic) corporate slogan and the managerial metaphor of change suppressed alternative interpretations and voices in the process of implementation (cf. ‘discursive closure’, in Deetz, 1992). Here, more people-centred issues (as opposed to

task-oriented issues) were muted by the rhetoric of ‘moving forward’, which, coupled with metaphorical phrases such as ‘moving in the same direction’, Morgan (2001, p.94) argued implied: ‘If they do not like the trip, they can get out, or go home’. In other words, as shown by this illustration, the use (and misuse) of managerial metaphor in change work is far from unproblematic. And (change) conversations seems to be key (e.g. Ford & Ford, 1995).

Huzzard, Hellström and Lifvergren (2014) explored the sensemaking and sensegiving practices of a top manager (change agent) and middle managers (change recipients) around a transformational change initiative, with a threefold empirical focus. Firstly, how the top manager made sense of the main cues behind the strategic change initiative (i.e. ‘strategic sensemaking’, Rouleau, 2005). Secondly, how the top manager engaged in communicative acts in interaction with the middle managers (i.e. ‘sensegiving’, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Here, the top manager used a visual metaphor – an aqueduct – as a key sensegiving device to illustrate and sell the vision and to, in turn, trigger and shape the sensemaking of others.

However, in a third step, when Huzzard, Hellström and Lifvergren (2014) explored the ‘change recipient sensemaking’ (Balogun & Johnson, 2005) around the metaphor, they found that the middle managers made sense of it in different ways. Some were cognitively and emotionally ‘aligned’ with the intended message, some were ambivalent, while others were indifferent and/or skeptical. To understand this divergence in meaning, Huzzard and colleagues suggested that the change recipients drew on three different discourses, or frames (i.e. mental models from socialization in the past, Weick, 1995), when making sense of the managerial metaphor of change. In other words, dependent on the frame, the cue (metaphor) meant different things to different people (in different conversations, Riad, 2011).

However, the absence of shared meanings did not stop the change conversation. In contrast to the received wisdom in the change management literature on the need for shared meanings and the use of (managerial) metaphor to facilitate alignment, here, the sensegiving device, due to its ambiguous meanings, was suggested to invite the change participants into an ongoing (change) conversation to discuss its meaning. In this sense, the sensegiving was about providing a compass – rather than a map (Huzzard, Hellström & Lifvergren, 2014).

4. Empirical findings and analysis

In this fourth chapter, we present and analyze the empirical material. Empirical material that, in the upcoming chapter of discussion, will be reflected on in dialogue with the theoretical framework sketched out in the previous chapter to answer the research (sub)questions.

4.1 Background

In this subchapter, we describe the case study organization (Swedbank), its organization and one of its business areas in general and, in particular, we introduce the two branches in which the study, primarily, was conducted. A subchapter that is intended to provide an introduction, and/or background, to the subsequent parts of this chapter on empirical findings and analysis.

4.1.1 Swedbank

Swedbank, with a history dating back to the establishment of the first Swedish saving banks in 1820 (Swedbank, 2018c), is a big Nordic-Baltic banking group and it has its international headquarter in Stockholm, Sweden (Swedbank, 2018a). The bank is a public limited liability company traded on Nasdaq OMX Stockholm since 1995, and it is one of the major financial players in its four home markets: Sweden, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Swedbank, 2018a). In light of its size, Swedbank – along with other large banks in the area – is said to have a central role to play in facilitating stability, economic growth and a well-functioning financial infrastructure in the Swedish and Baltic region (Sveriges Riksbank, 2016).

In its latest annual report (and since 2009), Swedbank was described as a welcoming and inclusive bank for the many people, households and businesses (Swedbank, 2018a). And its stakeholders were said to be customers, employees, shareholders and society (Swedbank, 2018a). Further, the bank offers a broad array of financial products and services to private, corporate and institutional customers through its four distribution channels: bank branches, an internet bank, a telephone bank and independent savings banks (Swedbank, 2018a).

As of 31 December 2017, it reported having around 7 million private customers and 600 000 corporate customers. In its largest market, Sweden, which is dominated by a few major banking players, it reported as of the same date as above to have around 4.1 million private customers and 270 000 corporate customers – making it, at the time, the largest bank in Sweden in terms of numbers of (private) customers (Swedbank, 2018a).

4.1.2 The organization

At the time of this study, Swedbank was divided into three business areas: Swedish Banking, Baltic Banking and Large Corporate & Institutions (Swedbank, 2018a). Each business area – and the CEO – were reported to be supported by an internal Group Function comprised of multiple specialized units that, respectively, were described to be responsible for HR, digital banking, IT, risk management and compliance (Swedbank, 2018a), among other things. As of 31 December 2017, Swedbank reported having around 15 000 full-time employees with operations in 11 countries across the world (Swedbank, 2018a).

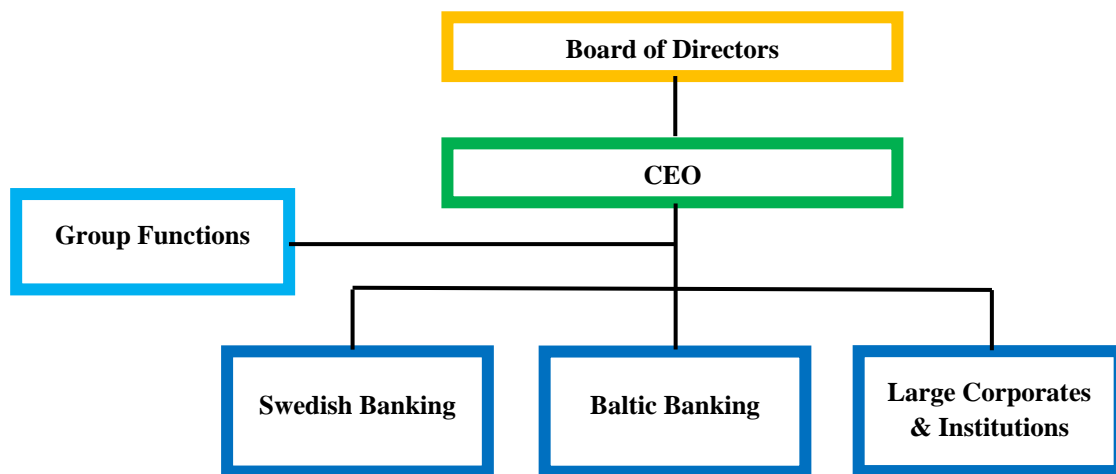


Figure 3. Organization chart, Swedbank (2018a, p.39, our illustration).

The organization may be argued to be, or even be said to be a textbook example of, a classic bureaucracy (cf. Weber, 1947) – sharing some characteristics with both the ‘machine bureaucracy’ and the ‘professional bureaucracy’ outlined by Mintzberg (1980) in his seminal typology on organizational structural configurations. Hereafter, following Schneider (1980; Schneider & Brown, 1993), we refer to it as a large ‘service organization’.

4.1.3 Swedish Banking

In this study, we focused solely on the Swedish Banking business area. Primarily, we focused on a part of its branch network in Sweden (to be described further in the next section). As of 31 December 2017, it reported having 218 bank branches in Sweden in total (Swedbank, 2018a). If putting this number in relation to the number of bank branches it had reported the previous three years (and beyond), a declining trend can be identified (year in brackets): 314 (2014), 275 (2015), 248 (2016), 218 (2017) (Swedbank, 2015a; 2016; 2017a; 2018a).

At the time of this study, its branch network was organized into four regions: South, West, North, and Stockholm. The regions were, in turn, divided into different branch areas. Each branch area consisted of two or more bank branches which, respectively, were staffed by a branch area manager, branch managers, private advisors, corporate advisors, customer service agents and, dependent on the size of the branch, other banking specialists. The branch area manager reported to the Head of the Region, the Head of the Region reported to the Head of Swedish Banking, and the Head of Swedish Banking reported to the president and CEO of Swedbank (Swedbank, 2018a, and see charts below).

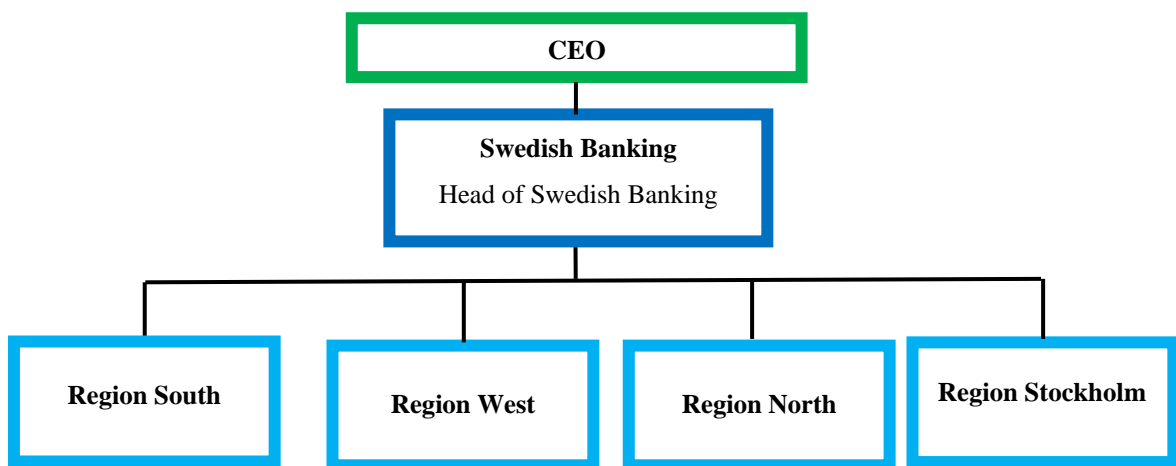


Figure 4. Organization chart, Swedish Banking (our illustration).

The branches were, as a rule, full-service banks. Accordingly, they offered financial services and products in areas of lending, savings and payments to both private and corporate customers, and customer service in person, over telephone, mail and other digital channels.

4.1.4 The local organization

The Branch Area, in which Branch A and Branch B (and C and D) were part of, was at the time of the study staffed by 45 full-time employees and 3 part-time employees, the researcher included (see table on the next page for an overview of the local organization). The branches were all full-service banks. The Region in which the Branch Area was part of was reported to include around 50 bank branches and 700 employees in total.

Branch	Private Advisors	Corporate advisors	Total
Branch A	13	6	19
Branch B	6	1	7
Branch C	5	3	8
Branch D	5	2	7
		Branch Managers:	4
		Others:	3
		Total:	48

Table 3. The Branch Area, an overview.

While Swedbank (2018a, p.189) claimed to be a ‘knowledge-based’ and ‘knowledge intensive’ company, we find it to be a bit problematic (and/or misleading) to apply this term sweepingly when describing its organization (cf. Alvesson, 2004). As it may be argued that the nature of its core activities, especially in the everyday work in its branches, rely as much – or even more – on mundane, technical skills (e.g. administrative work) and interpersonal abilities (e.g. ‘emotional work’, in Hochschild, 1983), as on the mobilization of cognitive capacities and/or out-of-the-box problem solving (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; 2016).

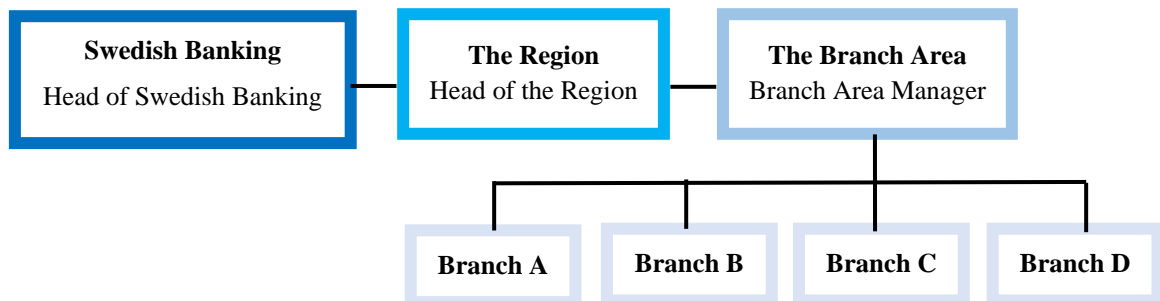


Figure 5. Organization chart, The local organization (our illustration).

As signaled in the previous section, the Branch Area manager, who reported to the Head of the Region, had the overall responsibility for the operations in the local organization. The local management team included, in addition to the Branch Area manager, three Branch managers. The latter group of managers was said to have more or less the same function as the former – with the exception that they were solely responsible for a number of branches and/or a single business area. One of the managers described the role as a Branch manager as follows, which captures how the other managers described their roles as well:

“The role as a branch manager is wide-ranging. This is a challenge. You have to enjoy working with people of different kinds – both in relation to co-workers and customers. [...] At the same time, you should be an administrator. And a business manager. You have to be a generalist.” – Branch Manager B

In the bank branches, the work organization was divided into two main business areas: private and corporate. The significance of the division between the two may be said to have varied depending on the size of the branch – the bigger the branch, the bigger the division (and degree of specialization of work tasks). Both groups of co-workers described, alike the managers, their role in terms of being generalists. Or, dressed in a more lifelike vocabulary, to be ‘good at everything, focus on everything’, as one of the co-workers described it to us.

In everyday work, the informants were said to be working autonomously. When they needed a second-opinion on a case, colleagues were asked. And once or twice a week, they took part in manager-led meetings in which both overarching matters of the organization (e.g. strategy and results) and details of work (e.g. new rules and routines) were ‘discussed’.

4.2 Strategic change

In this subchapter, we describe Swedbank’s Wanted Position and its strategic change process in light of (perceived) external and internal forces for change. And some of its challenges.

4.2.1 A banking industry and work organization in transformation and flux

The traditional banking industry and its work organizations were, like many other industries and work organizations at the time, reported to be in a state of flux (e.g. Deloitte, 2018; EY, 2013; KPMG, 2017; McKinsey, 2016a; PwC, 2015; The Economist, 2017). The major forces for (strategic) change were suggested, for example, by some of the major banking players in the Swedish market (Swedbank included), to be shifting customer preferences and behaviors, new regulations, increased competition, and, most significantly, a digital transformation (e.g. Danske Bank, 2018; Handelsbanken, 2018; Nordea, 2018; SEB, 2018a; Swedbank, 2018a). Perceived changes that were embedded in (meta)discourses of, for example, the knowledge economy, globalization, rationalizations, macroeconomic turbulence, and so on.

For example, the (continuous) development of new products, services, and distribution channels was argued to be a critical factor for ‘success’ as customers were reported to, in a greater extent, want to interact with the banks through their digital channels (rather than their physical bank branches). And, as new regulations had been enacted that demanded increased

transparency and information sharing to the market, it was argued to have become easier for customers to compare offerings and prices between different banks, and also to switch banks.

Further, FinTech (abbreviation for financial technology) companies entering the sector were reported to disrupt the market with new financial solutions and innovations – forcing the banks to reimagine the traditional way of providing financial products and services. Here, incumbent financial institutions (e.g. Swedbank) were, as well, partnering with these start-up innovators in efforts to ‘drive change’. In addition, large tech companies (e.g. Amazon, Google and Facebook) were narrated as major threats with potentially disruptive effects on the whole banking industry (e.g. Fortune, 2017; PwC, 2017a; 2017b).

4.2.2 The Wanted Position

At the time of this study, Swedbank’s espoused vision was to ‘enable people, businesses and society to grow’ and its espoused purpose was to ‘promote a sound and sustainable financial situation for the many households and businesses’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.1). In addition, its espoused values were based on openness, simplicity and caring – which were described to ‘express the bank's engagement and long-term value creation’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.1).

On the backdrop of these statements, along with the perceived forces for change (e.g. market shifts, new regulations, increased competition, and a digital transformation) outlined in the previous section, Swedbank’s top management team had defined a strategic position, or a vision statement, of the organization (e.g. Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012; Mintzberg, 1987) – to be reached around 5 to 10 years into the future. A (grand) plan that was referred to as Swedbank’s ‘Wanted Position’, and it was launched in September 2016 in the organization. It was described to rest on three pillars (Swedbank, 2017b):

- (1) Swedbank should be the leading bank for the many households and businesses in their home markets;
- (2) Swedbank should have satisfied and loyal customers who trust the bank; and
- (3) Swedbank should be a profitable and sustainable bank.

To reach its Wanted Position, the administrative elite of the organization had crafted a ‘customer-centric strategy’ that was reported to rest on four pillars (Swedbank, 2018a, p.8):

- (A) Available full-service bank;
- (B) Personalized offers;
- (C) High cost-efficiency; and
- (D) Low risk.

Somewhat simplified, each strategic pillar was described to correspond to a quantitative goal measurement (Swedbank, 2018a, p.10). For example, the two former pillars corresponded to a customer value measurement. The rationale behind this measurement may, in brief, be argued to have been: the higher the customer value, the higher the customer satisfaction (e.g. Woodruff, 1997). And the higher the customer satisfaction, the lower the risk that customers would switch bank (e.g. ‘customer loyalty’, Rust & Zahorik, 1993).

In addition, a key measurement (and to be described in more detail in the upcoming subchapters) was reported to be an employee engagement index. The rationale behind this goal may, in short, be said to have been: the higher the employee engagement, the higher the customer satisfaction (e.g. Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002). Thus, employee engagement was assumed to indirectly ‘contribute to a successful business’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.10).

4.2.3 The strategic change process

Since around the end of 2010, in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, Swedbank had reported strong financial results – high cost-efficiency, low risk, and high profitability (Swedbank, 2018a). However, to survive and capitalize in an ‘ever-changing world’ and to, accordingly, reach its Wanted Position, Swedbank reported that it continuously needed to anticipate and adapt to (perceived) changes in the market, the banking industry and society (Swedbank, 2018a). As illustrated in the following quotes by the Head of Swedish Banking:

“When you [Swedbank] have gone from being almost bankrupt to being one of the highest valued [banks in Europe], a crisis is good. Crisis awareness leads to very good things if you can handle it. When speaking of change, it is dangerous to handle change like doing something and then putting the ‘book on the bookshelf’ and think that it is done. One of the most important things you [as a manager] have to work with is that everything is changing all the time. Change is a constant state.”

“A company must be in a constant state of crisis. Otherwise, you will not drive the change. You need to evaluate. This is going well today. Will it go well tomorrow? Do we need to do anything differently? If you work in that way, you will stay on top of it.”

Here, change (and crisis) – not stability – was framed by the Head of Swedish Banking to be the natural and/or ideal state of the organization (e.g. Morgan & Spicer, 2009).

In this process of change, its goals and strategies (of which some were outlined in the previous section) were reported to provide guidelines, direction and focus to the members of the organization in their everyday work (Swedbank, 2018a). Goals and strategies which were

metaphorically conceptualized as a map respectively a compass (Swedbank, 2017b, p.2). And here, in the process of implementing strategic change, its middle managers were framed as key change agents (e.g. ‘change intermediaries’, Balogun, 2003). For example:

“Managers have to point the way forward and implement changes [...]”
– Swedbank (2015a, p.10)

“Our leaders foster a values-based culture [...] to lead employees through change.”
– Swedbank (2018a, p.16)

4.2.4 Challenges of change in an imperfect (banking) world

Life in organizations in general and strategic change in particular is, however, not without its imperfections (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). For the purpose of contextualization, three (competing) challenges which we interpreted to be of particular prominence in the local organization under study are introduced in brief below: adapting to and being compliant with new regulatory frameworks, low(er) costs and internal efficiency, and digitizing the customers. In other words, here, the first challenge corresponds to the strategic pillar of low risk, the second challenge to high cost-efficiency, and the third challenge to the two external, customer-oriented strategic pillars (see p.65 for an overview).

During the period of our project (December 2017 to May 2018), three major regulatory frameworks were implemented in Swedbank (and in all the other Swedish banks, for that matter): Markets in Financial Instruments Directive II (MiFID II), General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and new amortization requirements. The two former regulations were enacted by the European Union (EC, 2018; ESMA, 2018), and the latter was enacted by the Swedish Government (on behalf of Finansinspektionen, FI, 2017).

To be compliant with the new regulatory frameworks, educational programs and new working methods were described to have been implemented throughout the organization:

“It is an extremely regulated industry and many EU-directives to work in accordance with. It requires a great number of resources to update the systems and everything to be compliant when the regulations are to be applied. And it creates a lot of challenges for the employees [and the managers].” – Branch Manager A

New methods of work and demands which were described by our informants to have brought about additional workload in general and extra administrative burden in particular:

“Our job [as banking advisors] has changed a lot in the last 5 to 10 years. Today, it is much, much more administrative work than it used to be.” – Co-worker D

“A lot of time is spent on documenting. And you are expected to meet certain amounts of customers – but every meeting takes a lot more time.” – Co-worker E

This while, in tandem, which brings us to the second challenge, that the number of employees at the branches (and the number of branches itself, as illustrated in section 4.1.3) had been reduced as part of its strategy of becoming (even) more cost-efficient (Swedbank, 2018a). In the words of the Branch Area manager:

“We are not that many left [at the local bank branches]. That makes us vulnerable. We are a bit anorectic on staffing.”

And in the words of a co-worker:

“We [Swedbank] do not replace the personnel who have quit. And this also applies to the manager roles. [...] We do not employ. And that is because of the cost savings. [...] That [to make cost savings] is the easiest way to keep the profits up. Because you [Swedbank] see something ahead, a change. And if you lose customers, or mortgages, then, at least, you have made cost saving. That is why Swedbank do not hire new staff.”
– Co-worker C

Furthermore, the third challenge, to be understood in the context of the two challenges outlined previously, was the digital transformation – to digitize its customers (and the bank). This is illustrated by the following quotes:

“It [change] is driven by the development of the digitization. That is inevitable.”
– Head of Swedish Banking

“Now it is a lot with the digitization of the customers that is our long-term objective to make it [the Wanted Position]. And yet to make the customers feel that they have a personal relationship with the bank.” – Branch Manager A

In 2017, Swedbank reported having invested in new digital projects, including a new internet bank and digitization of the loan process (Swedbank, 2018a). The branches involved in this study were reported to (have to) prioritize the digital transformation to a high degree. A process in which the co-workers were described to be expected to ‘guide the customers’ into the digital channels. In the words of one of the co-workers:

“In the perfect Swedbank-world, the customer arrives at a meeting, and we help them out [with their errand] – but, at the same time, we show them how smooth the digital [banking] is. So that they, the next time, choose that channel instead.” – Co-worker B

However, this issue was not without its challenges. As it, in tandem, was narrated to be many customers that still wanted to interact with the bank in person (at its branches):

“The problem is that we have an equal number of customers that want to meet us at the branches, that wants to meet us in the digital channels.” – Branch Manager C

“It is a balance. I think that is the case for many banks, how fast it will digitize. I believe that all banks have thought it would go faster than it has.” – Co-worker D

In other words, the digital transformation that was said to be driven by ‘customers changing preferences’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.28) and that the ‘fast pace of digitization is accelerating the shift from branches to mobile and internet banking’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.180) is perhaps only one partial side of many (competing) stories (cf. Brown, 2004; Dawson & Buchanan, 2005). For example, to quote two passages from recently published annual reports:

“The ongoing digitalization of processes is reducing manual labor as well as distribution costs.” Swedbank (2014, p.14)

“Distribution expenses through the retail network are significantly higher than when transactions are executed through digital channels.” Swedbank (2018a, p.15)

4.3 The journey metaphor

In this subchapter, in light of the empirical material presented in the two former subchapters, we introduce and explore a principal (root) metaphor in use by the informants when making sense of and narrating the strategic change process – the journey metaphor (e.g. Inns, 1996). This with particular reference to Swedbank’s espoused ‘digital transformation’.

4.3.1 Change as a journey

Swedbank’s Wanted Position, which we introduced in the previous subchapter, was said to us to have been communicated throughout the whole organization. And, according to its top management, strategic change was argued to be inevitable if this position was to be reached (Swedbank, 2018a). Accordingly, and echoed in the narratives told by our informants, its organization may be assumed to have been aware of that they were (supposed to be) moving from a present state A to a new future state B (e.g. Lewin, 1947).

In relation to the perceived external pressures for change, Swedbank reported making strategic adjustments to adapt to its environment and to create the conditions for realizing its main objective: the Wanted Position (Swedbank, 2018a). And here, in light of the empirical

material collected (and interpreted), we were given grounds to believe that our informants were aware of the strategic agenda, such as cost efficiency, customer satisfaction, digitizing customers, and being compliant (and updated) with the regulatory frameworks.

A linguistic artifact frequently used by our informants – along all three hierarchical levels included in this study – when describing the strategic change process was, in several respects, the journey metaphor (e.g. Inns, 1996). A number of statements illustrate this:

“I believe that the major journey of change today is that the customer expectations are probably more wide-ranging than we think. In this [the digitization] particular respect.”
– Head of Swedish Banking

“It feels that the bank has changed a lot during the journey.” – Head of the Region

“In our performance measurements, relatively many employees are satisfied. There are other offices with major challenges with their staff – so that they [the staff] feel a work satisfaction and are happy and proud to work at Swedbank. Then it is clear that you have a tough journey ahead” – Branch Manager B

“If you ask Swedbank, when I got training from our Digital Manager in the bank, then he stated that even this bank could choose to make that journey.” – Co-worker C

“Maybe he/she has worked [at Swedbank] for a long time [...] and might not care about this journey we are doing ahead.” – Co-worker A

Here, the journey metaphor may be understood to be used among the informants as a ‘cognitive tool’ to make sense of the ambiguous and uncertain change process (e.g. Pondy, 1983). Both managers and co-workers spoke of change as going on – or being on – different journeys. And while the journeys were not always narrated to involve a movement from a lesser state to a better state (e.g. Sonenshein, 2010), the discourse of strategic change was infused with directionality (e.g. Dunford & Jones, 2000).

When we analyzed Swedbank’s annual reports, the word ‘journey’ had only been used two times in the interval studied (1989 to 2018). For example, in the words of a former CEO after Swedbank had ‘worked through’ the financial crisis of 2008 (Swedbank, 2011, p.4):

“This is the result of the efforts of many individuals in the bank, who have demonstrated professionalism and commitment during the demanding journey we have taken.”

However, in other written official sources around the time of this study, the journey metaphor had been frequently used. In the words of Swedbank’s current CEO:

“[...] our digitization journey.” – Swedbank (2015b, p.1)

“Swedbank’s journey towards a modern and digital bank.” – Swedbank (2017c)

Furthermore, the metaphor’s discursive resources were recurrently drawn upon in the annual reports (as well as among our informants). To give a few examples:

“We have to have the strength to move forward.” – Swedbank (1990, p.59)

“It was only one step along the road in the process of change – but a very important one.” – Swedbank (1993, p.8)

“To follow the route that has been laid out.” – Swedbank (2000, p.4)

“The road there is a long one for the Bank.” – Swedbank (2003, p.54)

“We are headed in the right direction.” – Swedbank (2005, p.5)

“Swedbank is now stronger than in a long time, with greater opportunity to choose its own path.” – Swedbank (2011, p.4)

“Forward-looking actions.” – Swedbank (2012, p.8)

“Continue at full speed.” – Swedbank (2014, p.10)

By the same token, these quotes may also be said to support the following reflection by the Head of the Region:

“But, at the same time, I feel that we have always been on a journey of change.”

In other words, (talk about) change may be argued to be an omnipresent feature of its social fabric (e.g. Helms Mills, 2003; Morgan & Spicer, 2009). In addition, Swedbank was by no means the only large bank embarking on a change journey at the time of this study:

“In order to be a truly digital bank, Nordea is on a transformational journey.”
– Nordea (2018, p.8)

“Our digital journey.” – Handelsbanken (2015, p.16)

“... we need to be quick on our feet and challenge ourselves daily as we are on a fast and exciting digital journey.” – SEB (2018b)

However, we delimited our focus to Swedbank’s change journey. But, as illustrated by the quotes above, it seemed to us as if there was a lot of traveling going on in the banking industry at the time of this study (cf. ‘mimetic isomorphism’, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

4.3.2 In what direction are we going to travel?

As signaled in the previous section, the inhabitants in the local organization may be argued to have been aware of that they needed to move from A to B to reach its Wanted Position. Thus, metaphorically speaking, it was narrated to be on – and/or embarking on – a journey of change. In addition, it was narrated as if this was not the first journey the organization had been on and/or embarked on, but one journey among other – both in time and in space.

However, how they were to move from A to B was portrayed as ambiguous, uncertain and heavily dependent on external factors (e.g. Morgan, 2001). In our view, and as signaled in the previous section, one interpretation of seeing change as a journey may be to understand it as an outcome of sensemaking to cope with the abstractness of change (e.g. Weick, 1995) – to make the strange familiar (e.g. Gioia et al. 1994; Pondy, 1983).

On the other hand, the metaphor may also simply be a linguistic artefact drawn upon in the discourse of change – a sexy signifier and/or a dead metaphor (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) – with loose, if any, coupling with the level of meaning (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). However, now, let us continue to explore the journey.

The Wanted Position was referred to as the ‘final destination’ of the change journey, and it had, as previously described, been set out by Swedbank’s top management team (i.e. ‘top-down change’, in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). While the Branch managers that we talked to expressed their support of the strategy and confidence in the top management team, they were of the opinion that the direction of the journey changed too much. For example:

“The problem is that the strategy is clear, but the directing principles can change – how we are to achieve the strategies. Unfortunately, too often. It is like a quarterly ‘balancing of the books’. It is fluctuating all the time.” – Branch Manager A

“Yes, it goes very fast. [...] You know that there can come new [strategic] directives in a week.” – Branch Manager B

And, by the same token, in the words of one of the co-workers:

“They [middle management] get different directives all the time. The bank is very good at giving directives. One year it is like this, then the next year it is like that. [...] It is not a bank that keeps a strategy and follows it – it is not.” – Co-worker C

In other words, to ‘play’ with the metaphor (e.g. Alvesson, 1993b), the compass (i.e. strategies) was calibrated, but the map (i.e. goals) was everchanging and/or was difficult to

translate into action (e.g. Morgan, 2001). Something that, by the Branch managers, were described to be a bit problematic in terms of ‘selling’ the change to bring about ‘buy-in’ on the journey from the co-workers (e.g. Rouleau, 2005). As illustrated by the following quote:

“That is the biggest challenge in this bank. There are many [co-workers] that have worked here for many years that do not buy into the changes directly. They [the directing principles] need to be more long-term – for them to be convinced that this is the case.”
– Branch Manager A

When we asked the Head of the Region about this, he acknowledged both its occurrence and the problems involved, but s/he argued that it, over time, had become better:

“Yes, absolutely. What you say is one of the things that makes it very difficult to get everyone with you [as manager] quickly – that we [top management] change our mind. But I think that it has become less frequent [now than before].”

4.3.3 How fast are we going to travel?

All our informants argued that the pace of change, particularly digitization, had accelerated in the banking industry in the last couple of years. In the words of the Head of the Region:

“There has been a great change and transformation for a long time. However, it is just like it is accelerating now. It is not only becoming more digital with new competitors, but changes are now sweeping with radically changed customer behaviors, a lot of new regulations [...]. So, it feels like the speed is increasing.”

Here, in support of our informants’ ‘observations’, in our document analysis of Swedbank’s annual reports, we found that the word ‘digitization’ had been used 128 times in total – the first time in 2012. By the same token, we found that the word ‘digital’ had been used 337 times in total – the first time in 1998, and 318 times in the last five years.

However, regarding the (perceived) pace of change, it was narrated differently by our informants (i.e. ‘significant-insignificant’, in Sonenshein, 2010). For example, many of the informants, especially co-workers, perceived that the process of digitization had proceeded more slowly than expected (or, more slowly than it had been described by managerial others to them). Here, their previous experiences of change or, their idea of it, seemed to have been reflected in their present interpretations (e.g. Weick, 1995) which, therefore, departed from the belief that digitization was going to have dramatic effects on the banking industry and their work in the coming years (e.g. ‘stability narrative’, Sonenshein, 2010). For example:

“There are still great amounts of customers that want this help [at the branches]. We will most certainly have these 10 or 20 years more. But it is decreasing. But, at the same time, it will not change instantly. Still, there are many [customers] who do not want to use their computer. And we need to respect that.” – Co-worker D

“I mean, if we talk about the co-workers [in the local organization] [...] it will be to continue to do customers satisfied and do business. But if you look at Swedbank as a whole, then perhaps it will be a bit more turbulent journey ahead. But we here in the local branches – it will be business as usual.” – Co-worker C

Furthermore, while acknowledging that the pace of the change journey had accelerated in the recent years, one of the co-workers provides a somewhat ironic counter-image:

“They [the managers] have been talking about this [the digitization] in 30 years. I have heard from colleagues that started working [in Swedbank] in the 70’s saying: ‘Now the computer has arrived, so we will not need you next year.’ But they are still here. [...] So, the digitization process is not new, it is old. But it is not until now that I see that you can do this magic that I [previously] did not believe you could.” – Co-worker C

On the digitization journey, both managers and co-workers described that Swedbank was ‘ahead’ of its customers. As illustrated by the following quotes:

“The big challenge right now is the digitization journey. And to bring the customers on that journey.” – Branch Manager D

“And then it is the balance, trying to get the customers where the bank wants them to be. That is the big challenge.” – Branch Manager A

“Yes, it [Swedbank] is going too fast [with the digitization]. The bank wants a lot, but it is going too fast [...] We have to take care of the customers that want to meet us in person as well, which, still, is the majority [of customers].” – Co-worker A

As previously described, and supported by the quotes above, digitizing the customers was one of Swedbank’s main strategic priorities (Swedbank, 2018a). Both the top managers and the middle managers that we talked to expressed the belief that it will, over time, generate higher customer satisfaction and, consequently, secure Swedbank’s long-term survival:

“We are in a paradigm shift in which customers are not as far ahead in the digitization process as we might have liked them to be. So, the customers have not really begun to appreciate the digital platform so it, in turn, can have an impact on customer satisfaction measurements.” – Branch Manager C

“The challenge that we are facing now is that the everyday matters that the customers are used to doing at the bank, that we ‘hand in hand’ guide them into the digital channels.

The reason being that the customers become a little more satisfied – it goes faster if they use the bank in the right way. And what is the right way then? Well, there is some friction there.” – Branch Manager B

However, the co-workers did, in general, not share the managers’ optimism regarding the digitization and its (perceived) consequences on customer satisfaction (its ambiguities may, in addition, be argued to have surfaced in the previous managerial quote as well) (i.e. ‘positive-negative’, Sonenshein, 2010). For example:

“I mean, those customers do not become satisfied. Even if you offer a way that is faster. Because they want to come in [to meet you]. The customer is not extremely satisfied because, instead, they were guided to the internet bank. The journey where customer satisfaction increases from 65 percent to 80 or 90 percent. I doubt that.” – Co-worker B

Here, we argue, there are several interpretations available to make plausible sense of why the managers and the co-workers, on this particular issue, constructed competing narratives about the ‘same reality’ (in an interview situation and/or beyond it, e.g. Alvesson, 2003a).

For example, which we explore in detail in upcoming subchapters, the digitization may be understood to have been a somewhat sensitive subject among the co-workers. As the pace of change and the digital developments were perceived to determine the future existence of the physical branch network and, thus, their jobs (at least as they knew it). In other words, the ‘reduction of manual work and thereby freeing up resources’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.12) were, it seems, not always interpreted to be re-invested (in them) and/or to ‘free up time to advice customers’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.26) – but, instead, to reduce its balance sheet.

However, many of the middle managers that we talked to struggled with this question as well – indicating that the (perceived) impact of the digital transformation on customer satisfaction was a complicated and multifaceted issue. A number of quotes indicate this:

“It is a challenge. [...] Many [employees] believe that there are contradictions when speaking of customer satisfaction, when we see that it is not the best, and we see that it is becoming more difficult for customers to reach us.” – Branch Manager D

“The bank is pushing [too] hard with the digital channels, trying to direct the customers with the simpler issues.” – Branch Manager C

“The customers believe that the banks are developing too rapidly. You may think that you want service, the personal contact. And that is really important as well, but we need to have a high cost-efficiency.” – Branch Manager B

To sum up, the journey metaphor was used when theorizing change in discourse. The organizational reality of Swedbank was, in general, narrated to be in a state of flux and all informants were aware of the Wanted Position. However, there were variations among our informants regarding how the journey was constructed. Particularly in terms of how to reach this position, and how fast the organization needed to ‘move’. As such, although using the same metaphor, the informants constructed the journeys differently (e.g. Alvesson, 1993b).

4.4 The boat metaphor

In this subchapter, we introduce and explore a managerial metaphor of the organization in the discourse of strategic change (interpreted as a sensegiving attempt) – the boat metaphor.

4.4.1 The boat

In one of the first interviews in our project, held with one of the Branch managers, it came to our attention that the Head of Swedish Banking had, in a mailing at the beginning of 2018 (and in late 2017) to all the managers in the organization, made the following statement:

“We have to continue to work with those who are not in the boat.”

On the same powerpoint slide, below the quote, a drawing depicting a rowing-boat at sea had been attached. In the boat sat four persons, each holding a paddle, and rowed. However, in the back part of the boat, a fifth person – half underwater – was clinging and, seemingly, made the journey (!) for the others – and, perhaps, for itself – a bit more challenging.

Further, in the drawing, there were four speech bubbles in which a dialogue between the person clinging to the boat (A) and the persons in the boat (B) played out. As follows:

A: How are you getting along [with the rowing]?

B: Slow!

A: What did I say? This was not a good idea – I did not want to be part of this.

B: It is going slow because you are not in the boat!

The powerpoint slide with the boat was one of five slides in total (slide number four). In the first slide, the title page, it said ‘Leadership’. In the second slide, Swedbank’s five leadership criteria were stated. As follows:

1. I [as a manager in Swedbank] am clear [in my communication].
2. I am visible.
3. I give and take responsibility.

4. I work for and understand the whole.
5. I care about people and results.

In the third slide, which had the title ‘Development eNPS’, the result of an internal survey was presented. Namely, its Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) survey (referred to as the ‘recommendation index’ in Swedbank, 2018a, p.11). Below the title on the slide, the following question was stated (to be answered on a scale from 0 to 10, 10 is the highest):

What is the probability that you [as an employee] would recommend Swedbank as an employer to a friend or colleague?

A question, as part of an electronic survey, that was sent out to each co-worker at Swedbank around twice a year. The results were organized into three categories: promoters (9 to 10), passives (7 to 8), and detractors (0 to 6). In the slide, besides each category name, were two people drawn (as stickmen). Besides the promoter category, the figures were in green and danced disco (our interpretation). Besides the passives, the figures were in yellow and stood still. And besides the detractors, the figures were in red with their heads looking down.

According to the Head of the Region, to connect this elaboration on the eNPS survey with the boat introduced previously, it was argued to be interpreted (or translated) as follows:

“We ask the [employees the] question: ‘Would you recommend Swedbank as an employer to your friend and colleagues?’ And then there is a scale of 1 to 10 [sic]. Those who answer 9 to 10 are in the boat and are rowing. And those who are 7 to 8, they are in the boat [but are not rowing]. And those who answer 1 to 6 [sic] are hanging behind. That is the meaning of the [boat] metaphor.”

4.4.2 The organization as a boat

In other words, the promoters were put on par with sitting in the boat and were rowing. The passives were equated with (solely) sitting in the boat. And the detractors were hanging on the side of the boat and/or being in the water. Accordingly, to make the journey as effective as possible, the aim was to have as many promoters in the organization as possible. In the words of the ‘originator’ of the boat metaphor, the Head of Swedish Banking:

“That you are sitting in the boat together and rowing towards the same direction, it is fundamental if we are to be able to push the organization in the right direction. [...]. It illustrates how important it is that everyone is going in the same direction.”

While having too many passives or detractors in the organization were described to make the journey much more troublesome. As illustrated by the following quote:

“In many offices, there are usually a majority of promoters. However, there are also a number of negative people who might think that it was better in the past. They are a huge burden for the branches, or the boat. In some cases, those individuals voice their opinions during meetings and get a lot of space. There is a risk that they will bring other [co-workers] into the water.” – The Head of the Region

To those who were not in the boat, the Head of Swedish Banking had a clear statement:

“There are only two tracks in this. One is called development, and the other is called settlement. If you notice that you [as manager] have employees who are not involved, then you have to give them a chance. Because it may be that you have been bad at explaining. And everyone has to get another chance. But if you feel that it still does not work, it is ‘thank you and goodbye’. This is the tough part of leadership. Because then you need to act as a leader.”

In other words, in relation to the boat, ‘leadership’ was constructed to be of key importance. By the top management, the middle managers were expected to communicate with the co-workers in their organization to make sure that everyone understood what it meant to be in the boat, where the boat was going and what was expected of them along the journey:

“If someone [a co-worker] does not like the bank, you have to act as a manager. You have to find out what is the cause and what is the effect. It does not necessarily mean that people work in the wrong direction consciously. It may be because you have not received the correct instructions and understand where we are heading. And then you have a really important task as a leader.” – Head of Swedish Banking

In addition, another boat metaphor that was used by top management was described to be an Atlantic Liner in the Panama Canal. A metaphor related to the strategic compliance of middle managers and the overall objective of the Wanted Position. As Swedbank is a large organization, frameworks were said to be essential to create direction. The Head of Swedish Banking narrated the Panama Canal as the frameworks surrounding the Atlantic Liner:

“Regarding the Atlantic Liner, it is important that the organization has frameworks. Then you can have the freedom and mandate to do things. But to let go of an Atlantic Liner in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean without steering, then it will only circulate. It is an impossible mission. Therefore, the frameworks are important.”

A metaphor that, according to the Head of Swedish Banking, the CEO of Swedbank used as well (along with talking about journeys, as previously shown, Swedbank, 2015b):

“I know that [the name of the CEO of Swedbank] is talking about the Atlantic Liner in the Panama Canal as well, due to that she heard me talking about it.”

Furthermore, the Head of Swedish Banking said that he had used both metaphors during his whole managerial career:

“I have used these [metaphors], both the rowing-boat and the Atlantic Liner, during my whole leader career. In order to illustrate, to make people understand why it is important to work together. And why it is important to have frameworks and mandate. And what mandate means, and what happens if you go wrong in all this.”

In addition, in the context of frameworks and compliance, the Head of the Region had ‘extended’ the metaphor (e.g. Cornelissen et al. 2008) by using it to describe different styles of leadership. Here, s/he categorized three different leadership styles, and each of them was seen as a particular kind of boat (with particular attributes). Metaphors that, along with the idea ‘behind’ them, s/he reported to have presented at an internal management meeting in Stockholm. As follows (our summary of what was described to us during the interview):

- (1) The Tanker. The tanker is a branch where the manager puts his/her office in the center. The manager considers its branch to be the best and do not care about other branches in the organization. The branch has its own goals and plans and is, therefore, not compliant with the strategy set out by top management.
- (2) The Small boat. The small boat is a branch where the manager follows the strategic direction of top management to a high degree. The manager is quite insecure in his/her role and does not take any own decisions and/or have an own opinion. Therefore, it is difficult to make the subordinates follow.
- (3) The Ideal boat. The ideal boat is middle sized and combines different elements of the other boats. It is bigger than the small boat but smaller than the tanker, meaning that the manager master ‘strategic flexibility’. Further, the manager is in control and has the courage to make his/her own decision within the frame set out by top management.

Taken together, to sum up these two introductory sections in this subchapter before including the voices of middle management (and, in the subchapter after that, the voices of the co-workers), on the journey towards the Wanted Position, top management narrated the organization as a boat. Thus, the journey it had embarked on was not any other journey – but a boat journey. However, and as hinted in the elaboration above, the organization was not necessarily conceptualized as one big boat, but many boats. Specifically, and as we show in the upcoming subchapters, top management was narrated as the big boat (i.e. the Atlantic Liner), while the branches were, dependent on the ‘leadership style’, constructed as other kinds of boats. And it was these boats of a lesser size that, in turn, the co-workers were said to either be sitting in (rowing or not rowing), or be outside of (i.e. in the water).

In our view, the metaphor may be understood as attempts of giving (symbolic) frames, direction and content for talk, thought and action to change recipients on Swedbank's change journey. In other words, we interpret the boat metaphors as managerial sensegiving attempts that had the purpose of targeting and influencing the sensemaking of organizational others (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). Here, the primary recipients of the sensegiving attempts were narrated to be its middle managers (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2005). A sense that the top management expected to be translated into action to bring about strategic change (e.g. Hardy, 1996; and to be described in section 4.6).

Furthermore, another interesting finding on this topic was that boats, historically, had figured in Swedbank's annual reports (12 images in total in 6 different annual reports, and of which 4 boat images had been on the front page). One interpretation of its use, we argue, may be to understand it as an attempt of organizational image work (e.g. Hatch & Schulz, 2002). However, and/or in addition to this, in our view, it seems as if some of the boat images were linked to a journey and, accordingly, to organizational change (e.g. Inns, 1996).

This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Swedbank's annual report published in 2000 (Swedbank, 2000, pp.14-16), in which an image of a sailing boat on mirror-still waters was on a page where the bank announced a launch of its new vision statements based on 'a world of social transformation'. This coupled with phrases such as 'we are leaving the industrial society behind', 'enter[ing] the new economy' and 'times of major change'. However, this is not to claim that this boat and the boats previously mentioned necessarily are linked (that, for example, the Head of Swedish Banking was aware of this) – only that it indicated that this is not the first time Swedbank used boats in its communication in the context of change.

4.4.3 The local organization as a boat

According to all the managers that we talked to, the boat metaphor had frequently been used by top management both before and during the course of our project to describe Swedbank on its journey towards its Wanted Position. Here, the boat metaphor was said to have been communicated on several managerial meetings and in mailings (for example, in powerpoint presentations such as the one described at the beginning of this subchapter).

Further, in the Branch Area under study, its managers said that the metaphor had been introduced to the co-workers at one of its quarterly meetings (in which all the employees in

the local organization, as a principle, took part). Thereby, the metaphor was said to have been communicated along all three hierarchical levels of the organizations (as we define it).

Alike top management, all the Branch managers constructed the organization and its journey in terms of the boat metaphor. Thus, it seemed to be meaningful to them as well. The first time that we encountered the boat metaphor was when a manager said:

“I was going to bring a picture [the one we described in a previous section] with me [to the interview], but I forgot it. It really symbolizes the challenge that you have [as a manager]. The boat, everyone should sit in the same boat. It becomes quite difficult if you have someone in the water that are swimming back to the shore – when the others are trying to row ahead. That picture really symbolizes the challenge that we have. To get everyone to understand what direction we are going. And that everyone is motivated and driven to go that way – I believe that is the big challenge.”

– Branch Manager B

Furthermore, the middle managers in the local organization frequently spoke of the importance of what they referred to as ‘strategic flexibility’. Which, we were told, included a delicate balance act between two aspects: strategic compliance and local adjustments (to be understood in the context of perceived inconsistencies in strategic guidelines and goals – the compass and the map – from top management, as outlined in a previous subchapter). The first aspect, strategic compliance, was described as follows:

“I am the messenger of top management. I have to stand behind the decisions that the bank makes [...] and I have to communicate it to my organization. I cannot stand and say that I do not believe in it – then I would not be strategically compliant. [...] I am an employee. I have a mission. I am supposed to be strategically compliant and make sure that we deliver this [the strategies/goals of the organization]. And then it is about to communicate this as ‘smart’ as possible [to the co-workers].” – Branch Manager A

The second aspect of strategic flexibility, local adjustments, was described as follows:

“To reach the goals [of the organization] does not necessarily mean that you have to go in the same direction [as top management], sometimes you have to take a different route to get all your employees with you. But we know where the end destination is.”

– Branch Manager A

Here, in terms of local adjustments, it was not only narrated as a means to get a fit between perceived external threats and opportunities and the conditions of the local organization (e.g. McDermott, Fitzgerald & Buchanan, 2013), but also as a prerequisite to get all employees in the local organization aboard on the change journey embarked on by top management (cf.

Balogun, 2003; Rouleau, 2005). A balancing act that, among other things, was said to include (middle) management of competing interests (cf. ‘pressures from the top and demands from the bottom’, Albrecht, 1990, p.71). As illustrated by the following quote:

“We could have had the problem of having managers here that would have embarked even more on the central line [of top management], really pushing the things through. But then they would not have their personnel with them. Then it would have been a revolt. It is a balancing act. [...] The top management versus the co-workers. It is very important to find a balance there.” – Co-worker B

Here, we argue, the construct of the dichotomy of competing interests (and agendas) between the top management and the local organization in general, and the top management and the co-workers in particular, may be said to have been (re)produced (e.g. Morgan, 2001).

In sum, to connect this elaboration to the Head of the Region’s three leadership styles that s/he had defined and metaphorically translated into three types of boats (see p.79 for an overview), we argue that strategic flexibility may be understood as the Ideal boat (as opposed to the Small boat or the Tanker). As playfully portrayed in the following quotes:

“If we take the [boat] metaphor, Obviously, the boat cannot go as it pleases. In [name of a branch], you cannot say: ‘No, the Wanted Position is not our Wanted Position. Our Wanted Position is there [pointing in another direction]. [...] But you [the local organization] have some space to maneuver. From day to day, or week to week, or month to month. But not too much, then it will be a [ship]wreck. But not too little either, to just go with the flow. That became a good metaphor [laugh].”

- Head of the Region

“We do not have to row in the wake of the big boat. We can row a little bit beside it. Still, we should stay as close as possible – to get some momentum. Or, we have to do that [stay as close as possible]! Because we are supposed to end up in the same final destination. That is the idea.” – Branch Manager C

In this process, the managers narrated their role as, among other things, motivating, explaining and convincing the co-workers of the strategy and, accordingly, to play with the metaphor, to be captains on their boat (to be explored in subchapter 4.6). Furthermore, the interpretation of the co-workers in the water may be argued to have been well aligned with how the top management had described it to us. As illustrated by the following quotes:

“The most important thing is that everyone is doing their part and that we are rowing the boat forward. If you are totally wrong, you need to consider leaving.”

– Branch Manager B

“You cannot be the one that opposes and resist when everyone else is trying to row in the right direction, then you have to either follow or jump of” – Branch Manager C

“Those who are in the water should also evaluate from time to time. It is not only the manager who should guide, steer and force everyone to join [the boat on the journey]. It is very difficult and energy-intensive to have too many that are not in the boat.”
– Branch Manager A

By the same token, when we specifically asked about the symbolism of the boat metaphor, it was described as follows:

“The symbolism of it [the boat metaphor] is crystal clear. Either you [as a co-worker] join the ride, or you have to jump off.” – Branch Manager D

In sum, in light of these illustrations on how the middle managers used the metaphor of the boat in the discourse of change, how they narrated strategic flexibility (i.e. the Atlantic Liner in the Panama Canal) and constructed their role (i.e. the Ideal boat), and the alignment in meanings of its symbolism (i.e. ‘our way of the highway’, Morgan, 2001, p.98), it seems as if the sensegiving attempts of top management had influenced the sensemaking of the middle managers as intended (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). At least on the level of talk.

4.5 The boat journey metaphor

In this subchapter, we explore the boat journey metaphor in-depth. Here, after solely having included top management’s and middle management’s narrations of the boat metaphor in the previous subchapter, we continue to play with the metaphors by including the voices of the co-workers in the (change) conversation (cf. Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008).

4.5.1 The boat journey

When exploring the journey metaphor and the boat metaphor, both managers and co-workers added new elements to – or extended – the images. As illustrated by the following quotes:

“We are going to row through a storm. We are going through rapids. And there are sharks [FinTech-companies] in the water.” – Head of the Region

“The competition is razor sharp. [...] And as stated, these big dragons, Amazon and Google, it is possible that they will enter our markets.” – Branch Manager B

“We have top management that is in the big boat.” – Branch Manager C

“Our little rowing boat cannot get too far away from the big boat. [...] Sometimes you need to evaluate if there is space for your own interpretations, and if they are in accordance with the strategic direction. No, because then we get on the wrong course.”
– Branch Manager A

“And the boat is going straight forward. But if you are not flexible, it will end up as a shipwreck.” – Branch Manager D

“Yes, there are little headwinds when such new things [regulations] apply. But then it is just to row a little harder and get through the winds.” – Co-worker A

Here, large tech-companies were constructed as dragons as they were perceived to be a threat to incumbent banks in the financial sector. FinTech companies were constructed as sharks as they were perceived to sweep the financial sector with innovation and disruptive forces. Perceived challenges, such as new regulations, were constructed as storms, winds, and waves. And, if not mastering the (strategic) navigation of the boat, there was an eminent risk to go aground and/or capsize (or to ‘circulate in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean’, as described by the Head of Swedish Banking, p.78).

Furthermore, as described in a previous section, the informants did not talk about the organization as a whole as one big boat – but as many boats of varied sizes. For example:

“It is a bit of ‘we’ and ‘them’. I mean, our little rowing boat [the Branch Area] and the big boat [the HQ and top management in Stockholm]” – Branch Manager A

“In [the Branch Area], you could say that Branch A is one boat, Branch B and C are one boat, and then Branch D is one boat. [...] They have a bit different conditions and a bit different customer bases, and so on.” – Branch Manager C

A dichotomy that may, we argue, be understood to have been manifested and propelled in everyday discursive practices in the local organization (at least in an interview situation). As personal pronouns used when talking about the local organization were ‘we’ and ‘us’, while the personal pronouns used when talking about top management or Swedbank at a general level were, as a rule, ‘they’ and ‘them’. In addition, regarding the latter, the ‘they’ were often worded as ‘the [B]ank’ and/or ‘them up there’ (in the hierarchy of the organization and/or in Stockholm) (e.g. Morgan, 2001). As illustrated by the following quotes:

“You have to work with that, so that it does not feel as if you are too far away. That everything is decided in Stockholm. That is no good.” – Head of Swedish Banking

“You have to manage that, the ‘we’ and the ‘them’. Because, we are one company. [...] That is a bit of a journey. [...] That they send all the bad things to us [as some perceive it]. But you have to manage that because I do not think that this is good in the long run. The: ‘we against the world’, that will not work. [...] Because, it should only be one boat. Everyone [in the whole organization] should sit in the same boat. It can definitely be a thing to work a little bit with.” – Branch Manager B

“You can say that we are a bank in the bank. [...] I think that, for many of us [in the local organization], the bank is the branch. Not big Swedbank. [...] How Swedbank performs, we cannot influence that.” – Co-worker D

Although not necessarily apparent in the initiated boat metaphor (if one, for example, only would look at the boat in the powerpoint presentation), it seemed to be meaningful for the Head of Swedish Banking as well to add elements to – or extend – the metaphor:

“Absolutely. To think that it is a journey on calm waters all the time, it is not. It is a journey, and we get back to that all the time, that we do it together and we do it at the same time and in the same direction – because then the journey becomes different [to the better]. Even though there are waves, storms, or sharks.”

Further, as described in a previous subchapter, the customers were treated as a central part of the journey towards the Wanted Position. However, by the same token, there were differing opinions among our informants whether the digitization would generate increased customer satisfaction or not. In relation to the boat metaphor, the customers were put in two different customer segments: the early adopters and the late adopters (e.g. Rogers, 1962).

Here, the early adopters were narrated to be ‘floating with’ the digital transformation – being satisfied with using the digital channels. While, in contrast, the late adopters were narrated as being towed behind the boat:

“The customers that are willing to try new ways to meet the bank, those are in the boat. And then we have those customers who are dragged behind it. They want to meet the bank in the same way that they have always done. And that is a challenge for us, as we need to be there for both customers groups” – Branch Manager C

However, one of the co-workers suggested a counter-image (e.g. Palmer & Dunford, 1996):

“I do not think that they [Swedbank] sees the customers. I do not think that they are in the boat. Or, they are in the boat but they are taken for granted. That is the feeling that I have.” – Co-worker C

Below, a summary of the key elements highlighted and/or added in the image:

Source domain	Target domain
Journey	Change
Atlantic Liner	Top management/Headquarters
Boats	Branch Area/Local branch
Storms	Disruptive forces in the environment
Waves and headwinds	Constraints/Everyday muddle
Dragons	Large Tech Companies
Sharks	FinTech Companies
Map and compass	Strategies and goals
Captains	Managers
Rowers/Crew	Co-workers
The destination	Wanted Position
Panama Canal	Frameworks
Shipwreck	Strategic failure
Lifeboat	Late adopters (e.g. customers)

Table 4. Metaphors in use

4.5.2 Exploring the boat journey

In light of the illustration in the previous sections, we find it evident that the interpretations and constructions of the boat metaphor were extended above and beyond the initial question of employee engagement. As described earlier, dependent on the answer the individual co-worker gave on the question if s/he would recommend Swedbank as an employer to a friend and/or colleague, the co-worker was ‘put’ into one of three categories: promoter (9 to 10), passive (7 to 8), or detractor (0 to 6). The promoters were said to be sitting in the boat and rowing, the passives were said to be sitting in the boat (not rowing), and the detractors were said to be clinging at the back part of the boat and/or in the (shark-filled) waters. However, for the purpose of clarification, the results were disclosed to the managers on an aggregated branch level – not at an individual level.

According to the Branch managers, with reference to the survey results, they argued that the majority of the co-workers in the local organization were in the boat. Accordingly, the majority of the co-workers were said to be promoters or passives – and only a few were said to be in the water (or had reported to be in the water). However, in tandem, the managers

acknowledged that this categorization, in ‘practice’, was not unproblematic. For example, there was reported to be tensions and ambiguities involves between the interpretations of the managers and the co-workers. Both in terms of whether the co-worker was in the boat or not, and/or whether s/he was rowing or not. As illustrated by the following quotes:

“There are certainly those [co-workers] who I perceive to be lying there [in the water], but they perceive themselves as being there [in the boat].” – Branch Manager B

“The one who row the least still thinks that [s/he] works the most. There are always those people.” – Branch Manager D

Further, as previously signaled, all the co-workers talked about a journey. However, none of the co-workers had, on their initiative, used the boat metaphor when talking to us. But, when the co-workers were introduced to the metaphor and were asked to ‘play with it’ (e.g. Alvesson, 1993b), a multitude of alternative interpretations surfaced (Argaman, 2008):

“If the manager is not a leader, then everyone is in the water.” – Co-worker A

“Nobody is in the boat. Everyone is struggling to keep up.” – Co-worker E

“You have different views on your career. That means that you are rowing at different speeds and in different ways.” – Co-worker C

“Some people do not like the new way. And then you choose to be in the water instead and might think that it was better in the past.” – Co-worker C

“Of course, we are sitting in the same boat and are rowing in the same direction.”
– Co-worker B

“Some people do not like change. Which, in turn, means that you are outside the boat.”
– Co-worker C

Taken together, in light of these illustrations, we argue, it seems to be meaningful for the co-workers to talk about the journey metaphor and the boat metaphor as well. However, the two metaphors were interpreted and constructed differently both between managers and co-workers, and among co-workers. In other words, at least on the level of talk and the level of meaning, the co-workers embellished the managerial narratives (e.g. Sonenshein, 2010).

4.5.3 Exploring the boat journey even further

In addition to the discursive and cognitive variations presented in the previous section, it may be argued to have been emotional variations in relation to the boat journey metaphor as

well. Although the managers that we talked to seemed to be well aware of the (perceived) present and future challenges of Swedbank, and that their work situation included increased workload and responsibility, it may be argued that they, overall, reported a rather optimistic and positive emotional response to the change journey. For example, they described that it was stimulating to work with and/or in times of change:

“It [change] is very stimulating. It is fun to lead in change. Even if it puts a greater demand on you, with bigger challenges, it is the part that is actually fun. [...] You [as a person] are driven by different things and I like when it is windy and tough.” – Branch Manager A

“Yes, but it [change] is exciting. We have an exciting future. So, it [change] is also fun, of course [in addition to being challenging].” – Branch Manager B

The co-workers expressed a variety of emotionally-laden responses to the journey of change and the boat metaphor. Mostly a sense of anxiety, powerlessness and frustration (our interpretations) regarding the pressure of change and the ‘conditions’ of (and on) the boat:

“We feel that we try to stay at the surface, grasping for breath.” – Co-worker E

“Sometimes, the distribution of work is a bit uneven. Even though everyone is rowing in the same direction. I have pointed it out [to the managers], and I know many that have pointed it out over the years, but the managers have not seen how the distribution of work is. It affects you [...].” – Co-worker B

The Branch managers acknowledged that the journey of change had an emotional impact on the co-workers. In the words of one of the managers:

“Change is frightening, especially when you see that we are getting fewer. You are digging your own grave, as some see it. That the digitization is not bringing opportunities [as some see it].” – Branch Manager D

On the other hand, according to the managers, there were no viable alternatives:

“We have always worked with change. We have never said: ‘Now we had done this for three years, now we are finished’ – no news, no changes, no nothing. No journey that we are on. ‘We have been laying here on the beach’. That will never happen.” – Head of the Region

“You cannot just lay down and die [laughter]. [...] I do not believe you should focus on the uncertainty and that the digital transformation is going to replace all our jobs. You cannot perform if you worry too much. Again, just do it.” – Branch Manager A

“The demands are always increasing. There will not be any year where they [top management] will say: ‘Now we will lower the bar’. It will never happen [laughter]. Then we will be ruined, eaten [by competitors].” – Branch Manager B

“The world is changing all the time, which means that we must keep on rowing. Then, of course, it is tiresome if you feel that you are never rowing enough. I understand that and I respect it – but, in a sense, this is probably how it is [in the world of organization]. You cannot quit rowing, because then something else has happened or changed which means that we need to adjust and continue to row with the flow. You have to continue. That is [work] life [laugh]. Is it not?” – Branch Manager C

However, one of the managers stated that s/he would not use the metaphor of the boat again as s/he had recognized, or ‘picked up’, the emotional reactions from the co-workers:

“Maybe I should use the boat next time. Perhaps not the boat. They [the co-workers] hate the boat.” – Branch Manager B

Here, the meanings and the emotions generated by co-workers may be understood to have ‘looped back’ to the middle manager when reconsidering the use of the metaphor. This may be argued to be an example of what sometimes is referred to as the cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In which the sensemaking of co-workers, the receivers of the sensegiving attempt, become input in the sensemaking of the sender and, perhaps, generate (re)interpretations and modifications in sensegiving attempts in the future.

However, while the majority of co-workers expressed negative emotions in relation to the change journey, some co-workers expressed positive emotions as well. For example:

“I have no problem with adapting to new ways of working. You must like change. That is what is constant in the bank, there are changes.” – Co-worker A

One of the co-workers even argued, as opposed to what all the other co-workers had reported, that the work situation in the past had been a lot more demanding than the present one:

“Yes, oh yes. It cannot be compared. It was a lot of overtime then. Today, some of my customers can say: ‘I do not need to come in. I will do it myself.’” – Co-worker F

The same co-worker did, however, not recognize the boat metaphor and may, therefore, be said to have neither a cognitive nor emotional response to it:

“I do not really know about this with ‘sitting in the boat’. For a while it was ‘joining the train’, now it is the boat. It depends on how you [as a manager] want to create an expression, I guess.” – Co-worker F

Taken together, in light of these illustrations, it indicates that the interpretations and constructions of what something is, and/or may be ‘seen as’, is influenced by what it feels as (e.g. Smollan, 2014). The cognitive level and the emotional level may also sometimes be in conflict. In other words, on a cognitive level, it might make sense to see something as something else (i.e. a metaphor). However, on an emotional level, it may not feel as if the something is something else. For example, ‘I am in the boat’. But, it does not feel as if I am in the boat because it feels as if I am drowning (i.e. not in the boat).

4.6 The life on the boat

In this subchapter, after having explored some of the discursive, cognitive and emotional dimensions of the boat journey metaphor, we turn the limelight to the life on the boat. Firstly, dressed in a metaphorical vocabulary, we provide a more detailed account of how the middle managers narrated their roles. Secondly, we address a key managerial challenge – framing (e.g. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Thirdly, and lastly, on the backdrop of managerial symbolic management attempts, we explore some of its problems, pitfalls, and limitations.

4.6.1 Aye aye, captain?

As signaled in previous sections in this chapter, the middle management was constructed by top management (and themselves) to be key change agents – or captains – on Swedbank’s (boat) journey of change towards its Wanted Position. A role that was reported to include, among other things, to communicate with the co-workers (or crew). For example:

“To be clear, to be direct in your communication, you communicate where to go, why we are going there and what this will mean for all of us.” – Branch Manager A

“It is always important that you have a clear and direct manager who points out which way to go.” – Co-worker F

Further, the captain as a ‘role model’ was argued to be essential. For example:

“You have to try to keep the group together, that everyone goes in the same direction. Then you have to set a good example yourself.” – Branch Manager A

“I am screaming: ‘Now! Now! Now!’ [laughs]. No, of course, it is a mix as well. It is clear that I must row as well. But I would like to say that I am both rowing and pointing the direction of where we are going.” – Branch Manager C

“Managers cannot only point the direction, then nobody will follow them. To earn that respect and to get people onboard, they have to do it themselves.” – Co-worker E

In addition, the managers were also said to have an important role to play in fostering a positive work environment and/or a strong organizational culture (cf. ‘culture bearers’, in Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). As illustrated by the following quotes:

“You have to live the values and set a good example. [...] That is very important. So that the rest of the group takes after and live those values as well. It provides the direction of travel.” – Branch Manager B

“The manager has a leadership role and it includes to define this culture and reproduce it – how to think, how to work, how to be at work.” – Co-worker G

To play with the boat metaphor, we suggest that managerial talk about strategies, goals and/or change may be seen as ‘pointing the way forward’, role modeling as ‘rowing’, and fostering a positive working environment and/or being a culture bearer as ‘going down on deck’ (for example, regarding the latter, some co-workers described that they appreciated when their manager ‘came down to their level’ and/or ‘were at the same level as them’).

However, as much as the managers seemed to enjoy talking about these interpersonal roles, a fourth managerial role was reported to dominate their everyday work: management (and/or administrative excellence, if you will). In other words, activities such as planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating, controlling and reporting (cf. Gulick, 1937), among other things, dominated their agenda to ‘keep the boat afloat’ and to create the conditions for the crew to ‘keep the boat moving forward’ (e.g. Balogun, 2003):

“My role is to make other people [co-workers and other managers] to do effective work.” – Branch Manager B

“The conditions must be there. And it is the manager’s responsibility to make sure of that.” – Co-worker D

However, here, one of the co-workers suggested a counter-image:

“It feels as if the boat does not have any captain, but it is still holding its course. That is the feeling that I have.” – Co-worker C

4.6.2 Who is the captain on this boat?

In the middle managers’ role as ‘change intermediaries’ (cf. Balogun, 2003) in the context of strategic change, one challenge that we found to be of particular interest to highlight in

light of both the narratives told and our research interest, was framing (cf. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Some reflections by the Head of the Region sets the scene:

“One thing that I have identified in this [internal] survey [that all the employees do], regarding the employee engagement, confidence in top management, confidence in their supervisor [i.e. middle management], and so on, it that the confidence in their [middle manager] is, in general, very high. I think that the average is around 85 [of 100] or such. While the confidence in the top management is around 60 to 65. And we are Europe’s most profitable and successful bank. Then the confidence in the top management should not be that low, I think.”

Further, in light of these results, the Head of the Region described that s/he, on the one hand, thought that it was great that middle managers received a high score in these surveys. But, on the other hand, some results were perceived to be ‘too good’, which sparked a suspicion:

“Some managers have too good results [on the survey]. They are super-clear [in their communication], they are highly visible and accessible, they care about people and results, they give and take responsibility, they are everything. They are like 100 on everything. And then I think that: ‘something here is not quite right’ [laughter].”

In an attempt of making sense of how this (high) result may be understood, the Head of the Region suggested the following:

“If you [as a middle manager] exercise leadership in which you say: ‘the Bank has decided it’, ‘what have they now come up with in Stockholm’, or ‘I know this is completely idiotic, but now it is decided [by the top management]’. So, we have to do it. But I will help you. And I know [a random name] that you think and feel like that, but if you try to do it, then we help each other out.’ Then you work a lot with your own confidence in relation to your employees, but what you are actually saying is that someone else decided this. Then I think that we get [the results] as we have now, with very high confidence [among the employees] to their immediate managers and then a decrease [in confidence to top management].”

To flip the script, the Head of the Region suggested the following:

“You [as a middle manager] do not have to say that ‘the Bank has decided this’. It is better to say: ‘I have decided this’. Or, even better, to work with a question together [with the co-workers] and conclude that this [the same decision as top management] is the best way to do it. If you can manipulate it so that it will be in that way [laughter]. [...] To paint this picture. Then, I think, that the immediate managers will enjoy equally as strong support as today, while it will not be as low for the others.”

In this passage, we argue, the Head of the Region called for the middle management to ‘step up’ and engage in the management of meaning through the use of symbolic language in acts of communication (i.e. ‘symbolic management’, e.g. Siehl & Martin, 1984; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). In other words, the ‘what is’ – the material reality – was constructed as if it, in principle, was non-negotiable and (pre)defined by some top managerial else, but what the ‘what is’ was seen as – its symbolism – in the eyes of co-workers were argued to be open to (middle) managerial manipulation (i.e. ‘managers as meaning-makers’, Conger, 1991). This through the use of different symbolic discursive strategies in acts of communication (e.g. Marshak, 1993a; and to be described further below).

For example, according to one of the Branch managers, in one of Swedbank’s internal leadership training in which s/he had participated they had practiced using metaphors:

“It was in such leadership training that you have been part of. To use metaphors. I remember that we practiced using metaphors in this programme. It was an education that all branch managers took part of some years ago. [...] The purpose [of using a metaphor] is, obviously, to create a better understanding. Not to say: ‘now we do this’. But, to make it easier [to understand]. – Branch Manager D

Furthermore, instead of legitimizing and/or rationalizing top-down directives through drawing on the somewhat unsexy (but equally true?) discourse of ‘the [Swed]bank decided it’, the Head of the Region urged the middle management to be creative (cf. ‘imaginization’, Morgan, 1993). For example, by the same token as above, to use ‘positive frames’ instead of ‘negative frames’ (cf. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). As illustrated by the following quote:

“‘That [the name of the Head of the Region] has decided this.’ How motivating is that? [...] If you [as a middle manager] do that with everything, then it will be hard to get people on board. If it is only must do, must do, must do. It creates no energy, no engagement. Everything is just change, new competitors, new rules, new customer behaviors, digitization, and soon we will not have the branch left. Then it will be very difficult. [...] Then everyone [co-workers] will be very tired [of you].”

However, in tandem, the Head of the Region acknowledged that this was not unproblematic:

“But as mentioned before, obviously, it is hard [for middle management] to exercise leadership and explain why we [Swedbank] do as we do, when we are slimming [the organization], discontinue branches, and we are fewer and fewer who work in the branches. At the same time as this, to say to people: ‘You are supposed to do it this way instead, because it is more efficient for the bank’. But then you [as co-worker or manager] that it may only be a matter of time until you are no longer needed. So, it is

not an easy task for [our] managers. But that is how it is, when you are going through major changes, then it is the hardest to do leadership. [...] It is hard to be a manager.”

And not without its limitations:

“At the same time, if you do not get people onboard [when attempting to get voluntary buy-in on something] and you know that [the name of the Head of the Region] has said that [you have to do it] [laughter]. Then it is hard. Then at the next meeting you [as a middle manager] have to say: ‘You know the things that we talked about at the last meeting? That was actually not optional. We have to do it anyway, because I have been told so [by top management]. Yes, it is not easy ...’ – Head of the Region

Nor, sometimes, perhaps perceived as possible to manage the meanings of organizational others in attempts of bringing about an enthusiastic, guiding coalition:

“Sometimes you [as a manager] cannot create engagement and get followers and the people with you. Sometimes, you have to say: ‘I cannot discuss this. Cannot we just decide to do it?’ [laughter]. And then you as a leader, if you work with other things in a different way to get people with you, it may be easier to say: ‘But here we have to do this. There is no room for discussions. Can you just accept this? Now we do this’. And if the co-workers have confidence in their manager, then they might say: Okay, fine. If that is the case, then we just have to do our part.” – Head of the Region

4.6.3 All (wo)men on deck!

To further elaborate on this key managerial challenge, framing, we now include the voices of middle managers and co-workers. For the purpose of clarification, the reflections from the Head of the Region outlined above were not with specific reference to the Branch Area, but general reflections in the role as the Head of one of four regions in the Swedish Banking business area (50 branches, 700 employees), and 30 years of work experience in Swedbank.

Firstly, to set the scene, a quote from an annual report (Swedbank, 2018a, p.16):

“[...] the [managerial] role as [a] coach is crucial for successively and effectively lead employees through change.”

When our informants were asked to put words on the managerial role as a coach (or a ‘guide’, Akin & Palmer, 2000) in the context of change it embodied notions that could, we argue, be sorted under two subcategories: explaining and motivating. Regarding the former, parallels were often drawn to one of Swedbank’s leadership criterion: being clear. For example:

“To be clear, to explain why we do things.” Not to say: ‘Now we are going to do this’. Without explaining why we do it. To get the people aboard.” – Head of the Region

And, on the same topic, in the words of two Branch managers:

“I think that a major part in being direct and clear [pause] I mean, it is no problem to communicate positive information, that you [as a manager] gladly do. But, that you also can convey things about organizational changes, or challenges, or downsizings, or whatever it may be – I convey that information as it creates an understanding among everyone [in the organization]. Why it is in a certain way, why you have to do some things and why you make certain decisions.” – Branch Manager C

“The most important thing, if using the boat [to illustrate it], is: why? I mean, things are going quite fast right now. But that we [the managers] really try to explain why we do this. So, that our co-workers get an understanding of where we are going. And why we are going there. And what that will happen if we do not continue to develop.” – Branch Manager D

Here, as illustrated by the quotes, communication in general and explaining in particular was argued by the managers to be key activities to bring about an understanding among its co-workers (or crew). To answer the ‘why-question’. An understanding that was assumed to be a prerequisite to getting the co-workers onboard the (boat on the) change journey. However, not just any explanation would be accepted nor perceived to mobilize an adequate supply of discursive, cognitive and emotional resources (food supply, if you will) to travel:

“If I [as a manager] do not have any good explanation nor any good reason, they [the co-workers] will not buy into it. And I think that is healthy.” – Branch Manager C

“That is why it is important to [as a manager] be able to defend and motivate it [to] co-workers, why we do the things we do. Some of the co-workers get an assignment, you say ‘now the bank has decided this’, and then they do it. While some of them ask: ‘Why? Why are we going to do that?’. But the co-worker who asks all these questions may find it easier to follow, when s/he have received an answer to why we have to do it.” – Branch Manager A

However, and as signaled throughout this chapter, being a manager (or captain) is hard. To ‘lead employees through change’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.16) is an appealing ideal and fun to talk about but, (un)surprisingly, though, ambiguous and, perhaps, even encapsulating an arbitrary flair (the latter was, however, not part of the managers’ vocabulary). At least if it is to be translated, enacted and understood in the context in which it is sometimes suggested to come about – the (imperfect) life in organizations (e.g. Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

In our view, from a symbolic management perspective, the middle management was struggling with the ‘why-question’ in the context of Swedbank’s strategic change journey

(if putting their confessions under close scrutiny, in light of the normative managerial ideals which may be argued to have been partly propelled by themselves but, perhaps, to a greater extent, a result of them being subjected to the power play of discourse, cf. Foucault, 1981). We would even construct it as a ‘managerial dilemma’. To ‘solve’ this dilemma, we argue, the managerial discursive strategies used may be sorted into two subcategories: ‘symbolic’ and ‘non-symbolic’. The latter discursive strategy is summarized by the following quotes:

“It is very Swedish. That everyone [in the organization] should understand everything, that everyone should have [the opportunity to have] a say, that everyone should accept everything. Instead of seeing it as: ‘I am employed by an employer. It is the employer who decides where to go, what goals [to pursue] and how to get there’. Then, as I said initially, we can adapt to our [local] market and the conditions we have here. But ultimately, we have to end up at the final destination [set by top management], so to speak. Sometimes, I think that it is too much with all this ‘consensus’, negotiations and discussions. You spend a whole lot of time and energy on that. Of course, it does not have to be wrong either. As managers do not have all the answers either, or, the best answers to everything. I mean, it is definitely a great rationale for involving the co-workers and get their point of view on things so that we can make it as good as possible. But, if you cannot get them to follow, they are not really in the boat, then it will be ineffective.” – Branch Manager C

“A bank is not really a democracy. Or all companies, all limited liability companies, is not really democracies.” – Branch Manager B

In other words, in brief, what we refer to the ‘non-symbolic’ managerial discursive strategies may be argued to draw linguistic resources from a classic materialistic/transactional view in the management of the employee-employer relationship (cf. Weber, 1947).

The second subcategory, symbolic managerial discursive strategies (cf. ‘sensegiving’, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), may in light of the narratives told (and the observations made), we argue, be divided into two types: ‘positive framing’ and ‘negative framing’ (cf. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Somewhat simplified, as we described in the theoretical framework, positive (goal) framing is to discursively structure and promote a course of action (e.g. change or not change) in a way that highlights its opportunities. While negative framing is to discursively structure and promote the same course of action in a way that highlights its threats.

In the context of Swedbank’s digitization journey, to rationalize the need for (constant) change, the Head of the Region provided one of only a handful positive framing attempts:

“I think it is better to explain that if everyone in all the branches, when it comes to this kind of case, do it like this. Then it means that those who are going to take over

the cases afterward gets them the same [standardized] way. Then they can be more effective, and we can, perhaps, build robots that do 50 percent of the work. And then we can use those resources [that is freed up] to be more people who meet customers at the branches. Or we can take some of the money and invest in something digital. I think that you [as a manager] have to use that type of pedagogy to get people onboard.”

Here, s/he may be argued to have ‘painted a picture’ of a landmark on the way and/or the end destination, and gave it a positive frame (i.e. potential benefits and gains).

Furthermore, along the way, it was said to be opportunities for personal development:

“The opportunity in this [digital transformation] is that the co-workers are given an opportunity for personal development. To raise their competence, go to education, perhaps change role and work with something new, like more advanced advising.”
– Branch Manager C

However, one person’s perceived potential gains may be another person’s perceived loss:

“Many [of the co-workers] sees this as an opportunity [the digital transformation], but an equal amount sees this as a threat as they are satisfied with their situation as it is [now]. Nevertheless, to raise your competence you have to go to education and so on. It requires an effort and it requires something beyond what you are used to – to go to your job and do what you always have done. Everyone does not want to spend that extra time on that. And then, for them, this is perceived as a threat. The challenge lies in to get everyone to understand that this is an opportunity.” – Branch Manager C

And the point made in the last sentence of the quote was echoed in the words of a co-worker:

“To see opportunities. I think that is important.” – Co-worker F

These examples were, however, as hinted previously, some of only a handful attempts of using a positive frame when theorizing the (digitization) journey in discourse. The same holds true if including the voices of the co-workers. Further, while the managers argued that clarity in communication was key, some co-workers lacked transparency and/or a guiding vision (e.g. ‘sensegiving imperatives’, Corley & Gioia, 2004). For example:

“The need of being transparent. [...] What kind of boat am I part of? You cannot be secretive about how this boat looks like, then say: ‘If it does not suit you, you can go.’ You have to be more transparent. Where is the bank going? How will the bank look like? How do you want the bank to be? To be honest towards its co-workers. To say: ‘This is how it is.’ [...] Then I think that more people had chosen to jump off or stay.”
– Co-worker C

In other words, while our empirical material generally was packed with symbolism (as we hope is clear by now), in this particular respect it may be argued to have been anorectic (cf. ‘symbolic anorexia’, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Neither the Wanted Position nor the life in the boat (during the journey) were ‘envisioned’ in metaphorical terms (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), such as seeing the end destination as a ‘paradise island’ and/or a ‘safe harbor’, or seeing the journey as ‘riding the wave of success’ (cf. Morgan, 1988).

In a sense, here, as sensegiving is understood as communicating a prospective, guiding vision, it may be argued that top management and, in turn, middle management were trapped in the breaking of frames (i.e. ‘sensebreaking’, Pratt, 2000), and struggled to fill the ‘gap’ with new, (energizing) meaning (i.e. ‘sensegiving’). As hinted in the following reflections:

“[...] the Wanted Position that defines our goal, and the modern bank that we want to be [description of the goals, see p.65]. Now, you may ask, have we not achieved this already? Yes, we have. But we will not be able to maintain this position if we do not have the ability to adjust our operations to meet the new needs of our customers.”
– CEO Swedbank (speech at the annual general meeting), Swedbank (2017b, p.2)

“I mean, almost everything are we today – the vision, or the Wanted Position. Despite that, we could have more satisfied customers that trust us, absolutely. And then you think: ‘Yes, but, how exciting is the Wanted Position for Swedbank?’. But, when you have gone through this transformation, when you come out on the other side and still have this position – that is the big challenge.” – Head of the Region

In other words, at a top managerial level, as captured by a quote from Morgan (2001, p.96), ‘their main vision in recent years had simply been survival’. Further, on a more local level, ‘they were more worried about keeping their jobs than developing a transformational picture of the future, [...] to come through this survival period’ (Morgan, 2001, p.96).

Furthermore, to explore the managerial use of negative frames further, when we asked one of the Branch managers about this tendency, s/he said:

“I do not think that I employ those arguments. That: ‘We must do it, or else we will be out and sailing [a Swedish saying, may be translated into: on the wrong path, and/or lack of direction]. Instead, I try to explain its benefits. That we will get more satisfied customers. Because, our availability is limited. If we spend some time on teaching the customers to do it by themselves then I think that the customers who will come across the ‘threshold’ will realize how smooth it is.” – Branch Manager A

On the other hand, in the same breath:

“The problem is that, in parallel, we know that maybe we [as in the bank branches] will not be needed to the same extent, when we digitize the customers. That is what I see as the biggest concern in all this. That the co-workers will, even more, talk about that: ‘I rationalize my role away’.” – Branch Manager A

And in the words of a co-worker:

“Digitization means [...] when I sit down and talk to my colleagues, it means that we will be fewer at the branches. That we ‘work away’ our own jobs.” – Co-worker F

Accordingly, in light of this, we argue that our informants were preoccupied with using negative frames when theorizing the change in discourse (e.g. threats and potential losses). Further, the boat image itself may also be argued to have been given a negative frame (i.e. ‘go along or go home’, Morgan, 2001, p.99). For example:

“Absolutely. That it [may signal]: ‘You don’t row as fast as you could have done’. I referred previously to [the name of a former CEO] for about ten years ago. That: ‘You have to buy into it, or else you are out.’” – Branch Manager D

“I have heard many leaders [in the organization] who are a bit more ruthless saying: ‘if you do not feel that you fit in you can walk out from here’. [...] Now, it is a much harsher rhetoric. [...] I believe that is a dangerous rhetoric. That if you are in the boat, you are in. And if you are not, you can jump off.” – Co-worker C

Here, a counter-image given a positive frame was suggested by one of the co-workers:

“If I would ask you [us the researchers], if this person [the person in the water] would be in the boat and put it like: ‘How are you getting along [with the rowing]? Good! Because everyone is onboard.’ If you would use that kind of rhetoric instead. To paint a picture in which everyone is on board and everyone feels good. Instead of that one person is not onboard, and the other persons feel bad?” – Co-worker C

And the co-worker continued:

“I mean, [the Head of Swedish Banking], that is top management. If s/he used this rhetoric, then it becomes easy to middle management to use the same rhetoric if not harder. It has become much easier for my managers to say: ‘It is perfectly fine for you to look for another job’. Instead of saying: You know what, we need you here’ [...] You, as an employer, view everything as being replaceable.” – Co-worker C

The symbolism with the image did, however, make sense for some of the co-workers. As illustrated by the following quote:

“I mean, it is correct. Should you stay here at Swedbank, then you have to follow the orders of the managers. [...] If you are too negative: ‘I do not want to be here’. No, then there is someone else who wants the position. That is how it is.” – Co-worker F

4.6.4 Keep rowing!

When the managers employed negative frames when theorizing the digitization journey in discourse, we argue, their strategies may be organized into three subtypes: ‘the Bank’, ‘the Shipwreck’, and ‘the Myth’. The first type, the Bank, have already been elaborated on in this chapter. In brief, here, the managers (re)produced the idea in their organization (i.e. rowing boat) of the ‘we and them’ in relation to top management (i.e. Atlantic Liner) by drawing on the discourse of ‘the Bank has decided it’ (cf. discursive closure’, Deetz, 1992):

“And while it sometimes hurts when HQ [the headquarters] do that [pushing on cost-efficiency], you have to convey it [to your co-workers] to get an understanding.”
– Branch Manager B

Here, all the co-workers we talked to expressed an understanding of both the tricky role that middle management had and that some things just had to be accepted. For example:

“Everyone knows that this is nothing that is decided [on the local level]. It is not [the names of the Branch managers] that is stopping this. They are not the ones who say no to more employees [in the local branch]. Everybody knows that, I mean, that it is governed from above. With staffing and such.” – Co-worker B

However, in tandem, many of the co-workers expressed that there seldom was space for discussions (cf. Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008):

“But, that is a bit how the bank is. Often, there is no room for discussions. Instead, it is like: ‘We have to do this’. Then it is just pushed through. [...] I think that [if we would discuss it], that everyone had been aboard much faster. And everyone would feel much more confident in what to do. Then, perhaps, everyone would sit in the same boat.” – Co-worker E

In addition, some called for the middle managers to ‘speak to power’:

“If we [the local branch] is a small boat and then the big boat is up in Stockholm. Then those who gear the small boat, to dare to say [to top management]: ‘This is how it is. Now we want to do it like this because then we can deliver [even better results] in our market down here.’ You [as a middle manager] must always dare. Because, the one who always says: Yes, and Amen. What kind of manager is that? What kind of captain of the boat is that?’” – Co-worker F

The second type, the Shipwreck, is illustrated by the following quote (which almost verbatim was expressed by a manager in one of the quarterly meetings that we observed):

“Sometimes it feels like we are operated as if we were in insolvency. But at the same time, it is good that it is like that. Because, right as it is, there comes a Ryan [Air into the market]. You can talk to any old pilot or airline, they hate [them], they have ruined everything. Their whole lives. [...] They have changed the industry completely. And now, Norwegian, they bleed. They will be acquired. It will end up with that they will be acquired. They bleed very much. And the other classical examples, with Ericsson and Nokia. I mean, Ericsson, that is the only thing you read about – how bad it goes for them. Sacking employees. That would be the alternative.” – Branch Manager B

And further exemplified in the following quotes:

“Even if it goes very well [for Swedbank], we still operate as if it would be a sense of urgency. That we need to do a lot of things. Then some people might think: ‘But, it is going so good. Calm down.’ However, there have been so many extremely profitable and successful corporations that have failed to transform. And now they might not even exist anymore.” – Head of the Region

“I mean, look at H&M for example. They are struggling. That is a small alarm clock. The importance of embarking on the digital journey.” – Branch Manager D

In other words, to play with the metaphor, instead of pointing the way forward (i.e. a positive frame) the captain points at the shipwrecks they are passing along the journey (i.e. a negative frame). Signaling, we argue, that ‘the alternative would be worse, so keep on rowing’.

The third managerial symbolic discursive strategy, the Myth, which may be argued to be interlinked with the previously mentioned strategy, is illustrated by the following quotes:

“A bit paradoxical, is that the regulatory frameworks have made it damn difficult [for the customers] to change banks. [...] That have helped the banks a bit, the incumbent banks. It is not easy to compete there. But these dragons can if they want. And I guess that this is what they [top management] are a bit afraid of.” – Branch Manager B

“Then we have all the new players entering the market. That is also one of the major challenges I see ... [paus] we cannot be as competitive as them [in some products and services] [...] the niche banks.” – Branch Manager A

“As it is such a profitable market, many actors want to have a share. Then there come new strong FinTech-companies, but also actors such as Avanza [Bank] that establish itself on the stock trading market and take customers from us. And then Klarna, that establishes itself and takes a share of the payment market.” – Head of the Region

As described previously, large tech companies such as Amazon, Google, and Amazon were seen as dragons and FinTech-companies as sharks. Here, we argue, parallels may be drawn to an article by Pondy (1983) – the use of myths and metaphors to facilitate change. To play with the boat journey metaphor, both sharks and dragons in general and perhaps the latter may to some extent be understood to carry a mythical aura. As only a few, if any, actually had seen the dragons. But the legend said that they were there somewhere up in the blue, so ‘keep on rowing’ (cf. ‘ambiguity by design’, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Further, once in a while at a distance, when the captain looked in its binocular, a fin was spotted poking out of the water and the captain shouted: ‘shark! – all [wo]men on deck, take your positions’. However, at a closer look, after the fin had circled some laps around the boat, the captain and its crew noticed that it was not a shark – but a dolphin. As narrated in the following example, which played out during our project period:

“Yes, Enkla [a niche bank]. At first, you became really worried. The first day when you [as a customer] read this in the paper, then you [as a have banker] immediately have the customer calls such as: ‘I can get 0,97 percent rate [in a mortgage loan]. What can you [Swedbank] offer me?’. Then you get really scared: ‘God. Will there be a big onrush here now? How are we going to handle it? [explaining the problems and flaws with the new actor’s business model] So, as fast as it came, equally as fast did it go. We have had no customer comments after that. And if the comments will come, we have a battery of really good arguments [why it is not a good idea to change] that we can give to the customer.” – Branch Manager A

Taken together, to wrap up this subchapter of boat exploration with two reflections:

“The Wanted Position is the goal ahead, the bank’s vision as of now. But, in 5 years when we hopefully will be there, then things have changed. New actors, new regulations. And maybe we have to revise our Wanted Position to keep being attractive, and to keep reaching our financial goals. So, the co-workers have to keep on rowing. They will never be done. Because, you know this lifecycle in business? When you [as an organization] have become mature? If you do not continue to move, then you will fail. Then you will be finished. So, it never stops. And I can understand that this may, for some [co-workers], be perceived as tiresome. But the interesting thing here, then, will be to read what you are going to write, what the co-workers perceive would have been motivating to keep on rowing? Is it higher salary or something else? That is really, really interesting. [...] In Sweden, no one rows when they just get told to row, you have to understand why. I think that it has something to do with motivation. Have we [the managers] been bad explaining [to the co-workers] why we have to row? That is possible. I do not know.” – Branch Manager C

“There is never an ending. It should not be. At least, we do not hope that. It is like life itself. Is it not?” – Co-worker F

And at last, some hints on the constraints of language games (cf. Pondy, 1978):

“It feels as if what you [as a co-worker] get is: ‘Sit down in the boat. A solution is on the way.’ [laughter] Yes, you have said that for the last three years. But when does it come?” – Co-worker E

“It is therefore that I have been a bit frustrated in relation to my managers, when they talk about the digitization process. I am not taught in how to teach others [customers]. They just say that: ‘We have a too low degree of digitalization [the name of the Branch Area]’. Ok, but what do you [as a middle manager] want me to do to make it better? Can you tell me that? ‘Ehhh, yes, that was a good question.’” – Co-worker C

“They [the managers] have talked about something that, according to me, does not exist. Because I have not seen it [the digitization]. I have not been trained in it. I have only heard that it exists somewhere in cyberspace.” – Co-worker C

To summarize this chapter, a brief overview of the main points is presented below:

<p>Middle manager Change intermediary</p>	<p>Four roles:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pointing the way (communicating) 2. Rowing (role-modeling) 3. Going down on deck (culture-bearer) 4. Keep the boat afloat (management)
<p>Discursive strategies Communication</p>	<p>Two categories:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Non-symbolic (i.e. power) 2. Symbolic (i.e. management of meaning)
<p>Symbolic discursive strategies Sensegiving</p>	<p>Two types:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive framing (i.e. opportunities) 2. Negative framing (i.e. threats)
<p>Negative framing To legitimize/rationalize change</p>	<p>Three subtypes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Bank 2. The Shipwreck 3. The Myth

Table 5. Roles of middle managers and discursive strategies, an overview.

4.7 The boat journey metaphor in practice

In this subchapter, which is the last part of this chapter before moving on to the discussion, we move the analysis beyond, primarily, the level of text and the level of meanings to the level of practice. This by, in more detail, exploring and making sense of how the discourses, cognitions, and emotions embedded in the metaphors in use were translated and enacted in the imperfect practice. The three illustrative examples include sensemaking and sensegiving processes in relation to quarterly meetings held in the Branch Area.

Three rationales for analyzing and illustrating meetings – and not another event – are as follows. Firstly, in the literature on sensemaking and sensegiving, meetings are frequently argued to be key a discursive practice (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; ‘meetings are sense makers’, Weick, 1995, p.143). Secondly, in light of how our informants narrated the meeting in discourse, we interpreted them to be particularly symbolically-laden events. And thirdly, it was an event in which all employees in the Branch Area, as a rule, took part.

4.7.1 Illustration 1: The Breakdown

Regarding the question in Swedbank’s Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) survey that, as previously described, had been reported to be related to the boat metaphor, our informants argued that there were different interpretations of what dimensions of work to consider, and relate to, when answering the question. In the words of the Head of Swedish Banking:

“There is a basic logic behind that question. It is extremely important that all managers communicate it in the same way, no matter where you are [in the organization]. So that when you as a co-worker in [Branch B] answers that question you know the conditions for what it means. And what is expected with the answer. [...] But when everyone thinks differently [in regards of what it means], then the answer will be very hard [to make sense of]. Because then you do not know what is right and what is wrong. And then it is very hard to act [on that information] and do anything about it. For example, I was at [the name of a branch] that scored very, very low on the question. And the co-workers said [to me]: But why should we recommend someone to work at Swedbank? You are closing us [the local branch] down.’ Yes, but that was not the question. We make a lot of changes in our business. But do you think Swedbank is a good employer to work? If we are 14 000 [employees] today, we might be 13 000 in a few years. But are there good conditions [at Swedbank]? ‘Yes absolutely’. Yes, but why did you not answer that then? They did not understand [the question], apparently.”

Points echoed in the following quotes:

“But, each and every one [of the co-workers] chooses how to interpret the question. Someone relates it to bad salaries: ‘Yes, but then I cannot recommend Swedbank’. The industry is being digitized, there will be no jobs: ‘No, I cannot recommend anyone to work [here]’. While some think about the local: ‘I have very nice colleagues’. So, it depends on who answers [the question]. The answer you get depends on their frames of reference.” – Branch Manager A

“... [the co-workers] interpret the questions in very different ways. It is always the same question that is being asked, but depending on the situation, where you are, whether you are stressed or happy or what you feel in that moment. Then they weigh in different things when answering. And then it is a little bit like: ‘Aargh, I [co-workers] did not interpret the question in that way, I interpreted it like this.’ Then everyone starts to talk and that is when you understand that it is difficult to take the answers ‘too seriously’.” – Branch Manager C

“They get the question: ‘Can you recommend the bank?’. And at the same time, we reduce the number of employees. Or, we reduce the number of branches. And then they interpret it: ‘Yes, but I cannot recommend an employer that is reducing its staff. That is where the problem is. But that is not completely true. The employer can do well anyway.’” – Branch Manager B

“There might be many different reasons [for answering the question in a particular way]. That you feel that you do not want to work at the bank, that you have not been given the right development opportunities, that you earn too little, or that you do not think that the values of Swedbank are aligned with your own values. [...] Of course, you can have different opinions about things, and become negative. [...] But why drive a Volvo when the only thing you want is a Volkswagen? [...] Why work at Swedbank if you want to work with something else? So that is what is tricky.” – The Head of the Region

In other words, it seems reasonable to say that there is a lot of tension and ambiguity involved, regarding what sense, if any, may be made from the survey answers (e.g. Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). From a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective, an event at a quarterly meeting in the past was argued to have affected the way in which the co-workers made sense of the question in the present (e.g. Weick, 1995). In the words of two managers (and verified by the co-workers in informal conversations when we conducted participant observations):

“Some time ago, there was a regional manager who came to an area meeting and said: ‘This is how you should interpret the question’ [...] ‘If you do not answer [the question] this way, you [the co-workers] should reconsider if you should stay [in the organization]. That was not popular. It had immediate effects on the results [of the survey]. I do not think that we have had such bad results before. Because nobody likes when someone else defines how to answer the question’.” – Branch Manager A

“I know that [name of a regional manager] received criticism at one of our quarterly meetings, in regards of the question of how to answer [the question]. They thought: ‘You should not tell us how to vote or think’.” – Branch Manager D

Here, the regional manager’s sensegiving attempt may be understood in terms of what sometimes is referred to as ‘framing’ (e.g. Fiss & Zajac, 2006), as s/he was perceived to have selectively chosen what dimensions of the question to render as important and meaningful while trying to influence the co-workers to neglect their negative meanings and emotions.

However, in this case, the sensegiving attempt was described to have resulted in the creation of an even larger gap in meanings and understandings between managers and co-workers. In other words, instructing how the ‘receiving end’ (Bartunek et al. 2006) is to think and feel about their organizational reality appeared to have caused a restructured recipient cognition and a negative emotional response. This illustration, we argue, raised the question of how, when and to what extent managers can ‘manage’ the sensemaking of others to, in turn, create systems of shared meanings (cf. Schein, 2010; Smircich, 1983a).

4.7.2 Illustration 2: The Retrospection

As a next illustrative example, following Maitlis (2005), we are going to explore the (social) sensemaking processes around a quarterly meeting in closer detail (however, not the same meeting that we described in the previous section). Both before and after the meeting, we asked some of the co-workers and managers to put words on it. And the insider researcher observed it. The agenda of the meeting included, in addition to introducing the Business Plan of 2018 and presenting performance measurements, to discuss employee satisfaction. In the words of one of the managers in an interview conducted some weeks before the meeting:

“We are going to have a branch area meeting. There I thought [the name of the Branch Area manager] took a great initiative. [S/he] created some groups with our co-workers, where they got three questions to answer. How satisfied are you [on a scale from 1 to 10]? What makes you [as a co-worker] feel satisfied? How can it be improved? [...] This is really good input for us to get. To take the pulse. I hope that they [in the group] will be open, and then this will be presented to the group.” – Branch Manager A

The co-workers that we talked to before the meeting voiced a rather pessimistic view regarding how much time and effort they imagined would be spent on discussing employee satisfaction. As illustrated by the following quotes:

“A lot of numbers. And for me, they might as well send a video presentation so that everyone who wants can view it. Then we could have more time to discuss and share experiences with each other. Personally, it had given me more. And maybe some new energy and more job satisfaction than seeing numbers.” – Co-worker E

“I believe it [the employee satisfaction] will be forced. Much of the time will be spent on numbers. And then: ‘Take a five-minute discussion’.” – Co-worker E

“I have a feeling that it was something they [the managers] needed to check with us. Because they got it from top management. I hope that we will discuss it. Because it is really needed. But unfortunately, I do not believe that will happen.” – Co-worker D

Here, in addition, one of the co-workers described the group work as an ‘extra administrative burden’ as no (extra) time had been given to prepare the answers, while the other co-worker expressed that s/he thought it was ‘strange’ that not everyone in the local organization was supposed to do it (only about half of the co-workers had been randomly selected).

During the meeting, approximately half of the time was spent on the topic of employee satisfaction (20 minutes business plan of 2018, 20 minutes numbers, 40 minutes employee satisfaction). The group work that was made in advance had been summarized by the Branch managers and presented on two powerpoint slides, and one of the managers were leading the meeting. Although there were no group discussions, two of the co-workers voiced their opinions about employee satisfaction to the whole group (and the insider researcher were of the impression that there were opportunities for discussion).

After the meeting, the co-workers reported having ‘negotiated’ the event with other co-workers, in the absence of managers (cf. Balogun & Johnson, 2005). For example:

“There was no major discussion about it. Someone said to me that it almost seemed that they had handled it lightly. Someone said: ‘Yes, but we wrote more [on the paper handed in] that was not brought up.’” – Co-worker B

“It [employee satisfaction] was not brought up more than some words on the board. Then we went on. Then it was numbers again.” – Co-worker C

“We did not talk about it [employee satisfaction] that much. [...] But, I guess, that it is also an art [framing skill] of the top management or any manager. If it is not positive, maybe they will not bring it up. [...] They may not have taken the negative. You choose what to highlight in a meeting. And that is an art in itself.” – Co-worker F

Here, the co-workers seemed to have negotiated meanings and shared their interpretations after the meeting with each other. They may, therefore, be argued to have engaged in social

sensemaking processes and collectively concluded that numbers were prioritized and that there was no room for discussions regarding employee satisfaction (cf. Maitlis, 2005).

One, among many, interesting aspect of these sensemaking processes is that the actual time spent on the topic did not seem to have been taken into consideration. As previously described, half of the time was spent on the topic of employee satisfaction. When we made one of the informants aware of this fact, s/he was quite surprised. For example:

“Was it really that? [...] Was it [the powerpoint presentation with the comments from the co-workers] really up for that long? ... I barely remember.” – Co-worker C

These perceptions are, we argue, interesting as time is not negotiable, but may be perceived differently. Only two co-workers voiced their opinion during the meeting while the others decided to discuss and make sense of it on a ‘lateral level’ after the meeting (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2005). In the words of one of the Branch managers:

“The reaction came after the meeting.” – Branch Manager A

Furthermore, the meanings and interpretations generated from quarterly meetings were reported to sometimes differ between the branches in the local organization:

“And sometimes I call the other Branch managers [and ask]: how is the talk at your office? And my personnel have a totally different understanding. That makes you wonder: were we at the same meeting?” – Branch Manager A

After the meeting, the Branch managers had received cues regarding the interpretations and opinions of the co-workers and, thereby, understood that the reactions had been negative:

“I did not like it [the meeting]. I had two tough meetings just before.”
– Branch Manager B

“Then you can always discuss, was it the right way to address this issue in such a forum? In such a large group it is really hard to have a sensible dialogue.”
– Branch Manager A

Here, the meanings and the emotions generated by the co-workers may be understood to have ‘looped back’ to the senders of the sensegiving attempts (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In other words, the sensemaking of the recipients became input in the sensemaking of the senders, which seemed to have led to a retrospective (re)interpretation of the event in light of these cues and, potentially, to a modification in future sensegiving attempts.

4.7.3 Illustration 3: The Boat Journey?

The third and last illustrative example refers to the use of the boat metaphor at one of the quarterly meetings that the insider researcher observed (however, not the same meetings that we described in the previous sections). As (business as) usual in this context, the meeting involved a manager-led presentation of financial measures and ‘change accomplishment measures’ (e.g. eNPS and digitizing customers). Further, at this meeting, one deputy regional manager participated. Firstly, when s/he got the word, s/he introduced himself/herself (as s/he was new in the role). After that, in the discourse of strategic change (i.e. the Wanted Position), s/he used the boat journey metaphor (quote from field notes):

“Everyone should be on board the boat on this journey.”

As this meeting was held at the end of our project period and, accordingly, we had a clear idea on what to write about – we found this observation to be very interesting. Partly because it ‘verified’ that boats and journeys were neither only theorized in discourse by some of Swedbank’s employees when they were interviewed by two students of organization nor only used in powerpoint presentations by top management to fill out space but, seemingly, were also part of everyday organizational discourse (at least by some in a meeting context).

After the meeting, we asked one of the Branch managers who had been part of the meeting and interviewed twice in our study (and, thus, was aware of our research interest) if s/he had noticed that the deputy regional manager had talked about a boat journey. S/he said no, laughed, and said: ‘Did [s/he] really do that?’ (quote from field notes).

In other words, in a meeting (or any other social event), to cope with and make sense of its complexity, a vast array of stimuli may be argued to compete over the individual agents (bounded) cognitive resources (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Our point with this illustration was, alike the two previous illustrations, to put the use and misuse of managerial metaphors in its imperfect context – life in organizations (e.g. Martin & Meyerson, 1988). A point that we, among other things, develop further in the next chapters of discussion and conclusion.

5. Discussion

In this fifth chapter, we discuss and reflect on the empirical material presented and analyzed in the previous chapter in dialogue with our theoretical framework. This to answer our research subquestions and, thus, to set the scene for answering our main research question.

5.1 Metaphors and the symbolic management of change

In this subchapter, we answer our three research subquestions. The subchapter is organized into four sections. Firstly, for purpose of contextualization, we present a summary of the plot of the previous chapter. The sections after that each corresponds to one research question. Accordingly, in the second section, on the level of text, we discuss managerial metaphor in the discourse of change. Thirdly, on the level of meaning (and emotion), we make sense of managerial metaphors. Fourthly, and lastly, we discuss managerial metaphor in practice.

5.1.1 Swedbank's boat journey of change

Along narratives of new regulations, increased competition, changes in customer preferences and behaviors and, particularly, a digital transformation (e.g. Deloitte, 2018), the traditional banking industry was suggested to be in a state of transformation and flux. To exploit the perceived opportunities and/or to manage the perceived threats in its external environment to create the conditions for long-term survival, profitability and growth in an (ever)changing 'digital banking landscape' (Swedbank, 2018a, p.6), Swedbank was said to have embarked on a journey of change towards its Wanted Position (Swedbank, 2018a). A position that its top management team had crafted and later launched in September 2016 in the organization – to be realized within approximately 5 to 10 years into the future (Swedbank, 2017b).

Here, to provide a compass and a map for the change participants in the organization to use to navigate 'successfully' on the turbulent and challenging waters to reach its 'final destination', its Wanted Position, the top management team had sketched out strategies and goals (Swedbank, 2017b). A journey in which the middle managers of the organization were narrated to be key change agents (Swedbank, 2018a, p.16) – pointing the way forward.

To realize its Wanted Position, both the top management and the middle management that were part of our study argued that a change in the modes of cognition and actions among the receiving end (i.e. co-workers) of the organization were inevitable – to think and act in new ways. A (re)imagination of the organizational reality (and the self) that often is referred to as 'strategic change' (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

To bring about strategic change (e.g. Hardy, 1996), in addition to substantive actions, the managers attempted to influence the sensemaking of change recipients (and self, Weick, 1995) through symbolic action and language (e.g. 'symbolic management', Siehl & Martin, 1984; 'management of meaning', Morgan & Smircich, 1982). For example, by metaphorical

communication of journeys and/or boats in narrative form in every day (micro-)discursive practices (e.g. Dunford & Jones, 2000; Morgan, 1988; Pondy, 1983).

Symbolic management attempts which, in the context of strategic change, sometimes is referred to as ‘sensegiving’ (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p.442). A process in which, in this study, the preoccupation of the middle managerial change agents were to legitimize and/or rationalize the top managerial strategic change initiatives in the eyes of organizational others (cf. Pfeffer, 1981), and, thus, the need for (constant) change (e.g. Morgan & Spicer, 2009; ‘sensebreaking’, Pratt, 2000). And to, in addition, create an alignment in vocabularies, meanings, and behaviors among the recipients of change (e.g. Kotter, 1996; Schein, 2010).

In this study, we explored sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking along three hierarchical levels of Swedbank. Here, its top management was understood as the primary senders of the sensegiving attempts, its middle management as both senders and receivers (i.e. ‘change intermediaries’, in Balogun, 2003), and its co-workers as the ‘receiving end’ of change initiated by (managerial) others (cf. Bartunek et al. 2006).

In light of the empirical material presented and analyzed in the previous chapter, the purpose of the managerially-crafted ‘journey metaphor’ and ‘boat metaphor(s)’ may be said to have been to influence and (re)construct the sensemaking of organizational others (and beyond, Rouleau, 2005) in the context of the perceived ambiguous and uncertain strategic change initiative that Swedbank was said to have embarked on (e.g. Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). In other words, the change process was narrated as a journey (e.g. Inns, 1996). But not just narrated as any other journey, but a boat journey (e.g. Argaman, 2008). Thus, here, to make the strange familiar (Pondy, 1983), the experience of something – the change and/or the organization – was suggested to be (discursively) structured by a culturally shared and more clearly delineated understanding of other ‘objects’ – a journey and a boat (Cornelissen, Holt & Zundel, 2011; Koch & Deetz, 1981; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1980).

Furthermore, in the transition to the new (planned) organizational reality, the ‘move’ from a present state A to a future state B, the managers may be argued to have attempted to, in particular, highlight and manipulate how the change recipients were to make sense of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the boat journey, and what to render as important (i.e. ‘framing’, Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). For example, the sensegiving device may be said to have intended to highlight the importance of togetherness (i.e. ‘to sit in the same boat’) and shared goals and understandings (i.e. ‘to row in the same direction’). In addition, an ultimatum was

set to the ‘detractors’ in the Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) survey – ‘get up [in the boat] or get out’ (cf. Morgan, 2001). And, by the same token, the phrase ‘we have to work with those who are not in the boat’ prompted the middle managers to take action.

Metaphoric utterance	Translation
“Sit in the same boat.”	Togetherness
“Row in the same direction.”	Shared goals and understandings
“In the water.”	Detractors (i.e. lack of engagement)
“To work with those who are not in the boat.”	Settlement or development

Table 6. The boat metaphor, key elements.

However, the implementation of strategic change was, unsurprisingly, neither without its challenges nor ambiguities (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). ‘Swedbank’s journey towards a modern and digital bank’ (Swedbank, 2017c) was not to come about in a vacuum. But it was to be understood in a context of, among other things, new, demanding regulatory frameworks and top managerial calls for high cost-efficiency. In which the latter entailed, in the words of one of the middle managers, to operate the local organization nearly as if it was in ‘insolvency’ (p.101) and, consequently, to be ‘anorectic’ in staffing (p.68). Further, by the same token, the ‘digitization of customers’ and its implications on both customer satisfaction and the role (and need for) the co-workers in the future were contested and sensitive issues, alike what becoming a ‘digital bank’ actually entailed. Spurring questions such as: What direction? How fast? To what extent? And, perhaps the most debated issue, why (change)?

Furthermore, from a middle managerial perspective in the context of strategic change, in relation to the metaphor of the Atlantic Liner in the Panama Canal (i.e. top management) and the metaphors of the three leadership boats (i.e. local organization), it was narrated to involve a delicate balance act between strategic compliance and local adjustments – in which the ideal position (or boat) was referred to as strategic flexibility (cf. McDermott, Fitzgerald & Buchanan, 2013). Along with (middle) management of competing interests, to balance ‘the pressures from the top and demands from the bottom’ (Albrecht, 1990, p.71).

Strategic style (in relation to the Atlantic Liner)	Strategic fluidity	Strategic flexibility	Strategic rigidity
Type of boat	The Tanker	The Ideal boat	The Small boat

Table 7. The Atlantic Liner and strategic ‘leadership’ styles, key elements.

In this study, as signal above, the change recipients of top management’s sensegiving attempts were middle managers and co-workers. Specifically, the top managerial category included the Head of Swedish Banking and the Head of the Region, the middle managerial category included one Branch Area manager and three Branch managers, and the co-worker category included seven co-workers (from three different branches). In light of our empirical material, in relation to the themes outlined in brief above, the participants may be argued to have engaged in extensive social sensemaking (and sensegiving) processes in the quest of coming to terms with what the heck was going on (e.g. Helms Mills, 2003; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995; to be explored in-depth both in section 5.1.3 and in section 5.1.4).

Regarding the journey metaphor and/or the boat metaphors, in light of the narratives collected (and interpreted) along with the participant observations and the document studies, we suggest that there was a variation in how the managerial metaphors were made sense of along different hierarchical levels of the organization (e.g. Alvesson, 1993b; Morgan, Frost & Pondy, 1983). Both in terms of how they were theorized in discourse, and on the level of cognitions and emotions (e.g. Huzzard, Hellström & Lifvergren, 2014; Reissner, Pagan & Smith, 2011; Riad, 2011; Smollan, 2014).

In addition, if putting the managerial metaphors in the context in which they were said to come about (and correspond to), the imperfect life in organizations, it became evident, we argue, that the managerial giving of sense to organizational others is not an unproblematic enterprise. As it involves, among other things, an active audience (e.g. Corvellec & Risberg, 2007) and organizational constraints (e.g. Balogun, 2003). Points we elaborate on further in the upcoming sections in which we answer our research subquestions.

5.1.2 Managerial metaphors in the discourse of change

On the level of text (cf. Kärreman, 2014), the first research subquestion that we posed was: How are the managerial metaphors theorized in the discourse of change? As illustrated in

the previous chapter and as hinted in the previous section, all of our informants in Swedbank along the three hierarchical levels studied employed the same metaphorical language in the discourse of change – the journey metaphor (e.g. Inns, 1996).

However, we argue, although our informants used the same utterances to word their perceived (organizational) reality, they narrated the journey in different ways (e.g. Dawson & Buchanan, 2005; Riad, 2011; Sonenshein, 2010). Both in terms of second-level metaphors (Alvesson, 1993b) and the elements highlighted and/or added in the image (Argaman, 2008; Oswick & Grant, 1996b). Here, we suggest, a distinction may be drawn along hierarchical levels in the organization. Between managers and non-managers in general, and between top management and co-workers in particular (to be explored below).

The top management narrated the journey from a macro-level, strategic perspective (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015), while the co-workers narrated it from a micro-level, operative perspective. The latter including, among other things, local challenges, constraints and, in particular, the everyday muddle (cf. Schön, 1983). The middle management may, as the label implies, be suggested to have been caught in the middle – trying to balance the two perspectives (e.g. Albrecht, 1990; ‘change intermediaries’, Balogun, 2003). In other words, the same (journey) metaphor may be argued to have been theorized in discourse in different ways by different organizational actors (cf. ‘second-level metaphor’, Alvesson, 1993b) and, thus, constituted particular ways of thinking, acting and being (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Morgan, 1986; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Weick, 1995).

Parallels may here be drawn to Marshak’s (1993b, p.403) article on different models of change in which, as described in our theoretical framework, he argued that there appear to be two dominant interpretations (or second-level metaphors) of change (journeys) in the literature on change management: the destination-oriented journey and the process-oriented journey. In short, paraphrasing Inns (1996, p.21), the former journey involves a movement from A to B (cf. ‘linear strategy’, Chaffee, 1985), while, in contrast, the latter journey is said to be an essentially ‘explorative process’ – no beginning, no ending and no clear direction (cf. ‘adaptive/interpretive strategy’, Chafee, 1985; ‘emergent strategy’, Mintzberg, 1987).

To connect these two dominant interpretations of the journey metaphor in the literature to how it was theorized in discourse among our informants and in other sources of empirical material, despite of that all sources acknowledged the ambiguous and uncertain way ahead, we argue that the narratives told by the top management (along with the statements in its

annual reports) are to be located in the destination-oriented approach (e.g. ‘change as a grand technocratic project’, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015, p.50). In contrast, the narratives told by middle management and the co-workers in the local organization are, to a greater extent, to be located in the process-oriented approach (e.g. Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

For example, in the case of the latter approach, the question of what to change may be argued to have been somewhat clear (e.g. to digitize the customers), but the how-question, how to move from A to B, together with questions of why, who, where and with what (and, particularly, to what extent and how fast), was to a greater extent perceived to be open (?) to interpretation and negotiations among the change recipients. Often narrated as a balancing act and/or (middle) management of competing interests (in the context of scarce resources).

However, an alternative reading of the narratives told by both some of the co-workers and the managers about their own and others’ work situation may, perhaps, more plausibly be dressed in another vocabulary than change as an ‘explorative process’ (Inns, 1996, p.21). Parallels may here, for example, be drawn to Sonenshein’s (2010) article, in which he argued that managers and co-workers constructed the change in different ways – as a progression, a regression and/or a status quo. Here, in our case, while the managers, as a rule, narrated the change as a progression (i.e. move to a better state), we argue that some of the co-workers narrated the change as a regression (i.e. move to a lesser state).

For example, the co-workers often referred to the past when speaking of the things that they missed in the present (e.g. ‘you do not feel as satisfied [with work] as you did 5 to 10 years ago’). To this, among other things, many of the co-workers reported an increased job insecurity (e.g. ‘work away our own jobs’), increased workload (e.g. ‘doing the job for two’) and a sense of insufficiency (e.g. ‘you feel insufficient in relation to Swedbank’s goals, you do your best but, well, I did not finish today either’). Accordingly, if playing with the boat journey metaphor to illustrate our point, it seemed that some of the co-workers experienced the change as if they, for each ‘stroke’, got further and further away from a perceived better state (i.e. the past) into a lesser state (i.e. the present and the future) while it, in tandem, for each stroke, was perceived to become heavier and harder to ‘catch the water’ with the paddle.



Figure 6. Image of the boat (our interpretation).

To, conceptually, capture and articulate this experience which some of the co-workers narrated and to, in addition, build on and extend the vocabulary of the destination-oriented journey and the process-oriented journey (cf. Marshak, 1993a), we suggest that the latter category may be divided into two types: an exploration-oriented journey and an exploitation-oriented journey. Here, while both types are process-oriented, the former is understood as something positive and the latter as something negative (to be explored in the next section).

	Positive experience	Negative experience
Plan-perspective	Destination-oriented journey (top management)	
Process-perspective	Exploration-oriented journey (middle management)	Exploitation-oriented journey (co-workers)

Table 8. Different interpretations of the journey metaphor, an overview.

Furthermore, if scrutinizing the elements highlighted and/or added in the images (cf. Argaman, 2008; Oswick & Grant, 1996b), a somewhat dramatic landscape may be argued to have been portrayed. For example, to play with the boat journey metaphor, the elements in the image that were highlighted and/or added were waves, headwinds, storms, shipwrecks, dragons, sharks, and lifeboats. Not clear blue waters, pleasant (optimistic) breezes, the sun shimmering behind puffy clouds, jolly-boats, curious dolphins and towable tubes. Further, in light of that our empirical material, in general, was packed with symbolism, we found it a bit puzzling that its Wanted Position – its ‘destination’ – was not dressed in an imaginative vocabulary (cf. ‘symbolic anorexia’, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Instead, the guiding image of the middle managers seemed to be survival, while the co-workers had embarked on their last journey with the crew (to be discussed further in the upcoming sections).



Figure 7. The boat journey (our interpretation).

Furthermore, in another article by Marshak (1993a, p.47), as outlined in our theoretical framework, he suggests four types (or metaphors) of organizational change processes: fix and maintain, developmental, transitional, and transformational. Here, to use the metaphors of change effectively, he argued that there should be alignment between the type of intended

change and how it is metaphorically narrated in discourse. Swedbank's boat journey towards its Wanted Position may, we argue, be labeled as transitional (i.e. a teleological movement from one state to another, within the boundaries of what the image and/or the imaginization of the change agents and/or the recipients 'allows', e.g. Morgan, 1993).

However, in light of a (perceived) accelerating digitization, new regulations, increased competition and changed customer preferences and behaviors, both the top management and the middle management worded the journey as a 'transformation' and/or a 'paradigm shift'. This while, in tandem, drawing discursive resources from the interpretive repertoire from the transitional metaphor of change, such as 'moving forward' and 'stay on course'. In other words, on the one hand, Swedbank was on a 'digitization journey' (Swedbank, 2015b, p.1) – embarking on a transformational change. But, on the other hand, the change was portrayed metaphorically as a boat journey by top management – embarking on a transitional change.

At first glance, following the advice from Marshak (1993a) and scholarly others (e.g. Sackmann, 1989), it may be argued to have been conflicting use of metaphors. As managers drew discursive resources from the 'wrong' (or 'right', depending on perspective) type of managerial metaphor of change. Either that the (transformational) change had been (overly) misrepresented, or that the (transitional) change had been dressed in the wrong vocabulary. Potentially causing, it is argued, confusion among the recipients of the sensegiving attempts – rather than providing guidance and direction (cf. Greenberg, 1995; Morgan, 2001).

However, what if the organization may be argued to be on many journeys at the same time? And what if these journeys were constructed to be interrelated with different 'drivers' of change, each being of a different (change) type? May we talk about different journeys on different levels of analysis? For example, a cognitive journey, an emotional journey, and/or a behavioral journey, among other things? Further, may we talk about journeys of journeys? On the other hand, following Sonenshein (2010) and others (e.g. Eisenberg, 1984; Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012), perhaps clarity in (strategic) change work is not a virtue?

Anyhow, if playing with the transformational undertones of the digitization journey, it might have been more meaningful to employ another metaphor. For example, we suggest, a space rocket going on a journey from one planet to another planet in cyberspace. However, this managerial metaphor of change may also be claimed to be transitional – but it may be argued to embody a more radical change (i.e. paradigm shift), in which Swedbank recreates itself in a fundamentally new environment. If, of course, that is what 'it' wants? In addition,

it may be argued that the use of (cyber)space as source domain, rather than a nautical source domain, is more aligned with the intended change and, therefore, by some, argued to be more likely to be seen as legitimate by change recipients (e.g. Cornelissen, Holt & Zundel, 2011).

Furthermore, the images of the change agents in the metaphor of transitional change are argued to be planners, guides and/or explorers as they are ‘more familiar with the journey and with what to expect along the way’ (Marshak, 1993a, p.48). However, this portrayal may perhaps be a bit misleading due to that the digitization journey that Swedbank had embarked on was framed as a journey unlike any other journey that they had embarked on in the past. Here, in contrast, cyberspace may be said to represent something ambiguous, uncertain and unknown (e.g. loss of gravity) and few, if any, of the members of Swedbank had been out in space (at least to our knowledge and at the time of this study).

Taken together, we argue, a space rocket into cyberspace would more plausibly capture both the perceived transformational aspects of change and the fact that few had embarked on this (digitization) journey before (at least not in a space rocket of the size of Swedbank, a ‘machine bureaucracy’, Mintzberg, 1980). As illustrated in the following quote:

“There is a lack of knowledge. [...] Because I think that there are many who talks about this digitization process because that is what is expected – if you do not do it, then you are out. [...] Then you are not a company of the future. And I think that it is the same thing here. They [Swedbank] constantly talk about a digitization process, but I think that there is perhaps 2 or 3 people in the whole [Swed]bank who know what it [digitization] is all about.” – Co-worker C

In other words, the organizational members may be argued to have been on journeys before and knew what journeys, in general, entailed (e.g. passport controls and limited leg space) – but few, if any, were familiar with this kind of journey and, thus, what to expect on the way.

	Boat journey	Space journey
Source domain	Nautical	Space
Metaphor of change	Transitional	Transitional/Transformational
Metaphor of organization	Boat	Spacecraft
Image of change agent	Captain	Commander/Pilot
Image of change recipient	Rower	Co-pilot/Specialist

Table 9. The space journey metaphor, an overview.

However, one critical question may be argued to be which of the two (root) metaphors, the boat journey or the space journey, that embodies the most ‘generative potential’ (Schön, 1979) in terms of propelling the legitimacy and need for (constant) change and, in the words of Swedbank’s Head of Swedish Banking, constant crisis awareness (cf. Morgan & Spicer, 2009). Titanic or Apollo 13 (cf. ‘ambiguity by design’, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p.445)?

To sum up this section, one of the key features of seeing something as something else (e.g. change as a journey) is sometimes said to be the partial understanding it brings – some elements in the image are hidden, some are highlighted, some are neglected, some are added, and so on (e.g. Alvesson, 1993b; Morgan, 2001; Pondy, 1983). In this section, we explored the principal metaphors in use through, conceptually, extending them (cf. Cornelissen et al. 2008). This in an attempt to make the seemingly familiar – journeys and boats – strange (cf. Alvesson, Kärreman & Ybema, 2017). Here, among other things, we illustrated how one and the same metaphor may be constructed in different ways by different organizational actors (e.g. Argaman, 2008; Huzzard, Hellström & Lifvergren, 2014; Riad, 2011).

To this, we also find it interesting to ask: what elements in the image are taken-for-granted and/or suppressed (cf. ‘hegemonic stories’, in Brown, 2004; Dawson & Buchanan, 2005; ‘discursive closure’, Deetz, 1992)? For example, are the managers always in the boat (i.e. not in the water)? Are managers and co-workers in the same boat? The co-workers who are reported – and/or have reported themselves – to be overboard, were they pushed, did they fall and/or were they just taking a swim? What is the big boat following? And the irony of all this talking about movement, when Swedbank is a massive, bureaucratic colossus?

5.1.3 Making sense of managerial metaphors

On the level of meaning (cf. Kärreman, 2014) and emotions, the second research subquestion that we posed was: How are the managerial metaphors made sense of? Here, while we in the previous section, primarily, discussed the metaphors on the level of discourse, we now move to the level of meaning and emotions. Thus, we put particular focus on sensemaking (Weick, 1995). A quote by Morgan, Frost and Pondy (1983, p.25) sets the scene:

“The same symbols can mean different things to different people, because they are used to make sense of the world in different ways.”

And the same logic applies to metaphors, the linguistic surface of symbols (Riceour, 1976).

As illustrated in the previous chapter, and as elaborated on in the previous section as well, we found a wide variation in how the top managerial metaphors were made sense of along different hierarchical levels of the organization. Both in terms of how the metaphors were theorized in the discourse of change (as discussed in the previous section), and on the level of cognitions and emotions (as discussed below). In light of that we assumed a tight – as opposed to a loose – coupling between meaning and discourse (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b), we have already, to some extent, touched upon the level of meaning and emotions. However, as it sometimes is said to be a lot of things going on in an interview situation (cf. Alvesson, 2003b) and that the totality of the organizational experience seldom allow itself to be captured, we now move beyond surface level symbolism to make plausible sense of the meanings of the (espoused) meanings and emotions of the informants.

In brief, our findings indicate that the ‘senetakers’ did not necessarily make the same sense of the sensegiving attempts as the ‘sensegivers’ (e.g. Bartunek et al. 1999; Corvellec & Risberg, 2007). Here, we identified misalignments in how the managerial metaphors were theorized in discourse, its meanings and the emotions evoked between managers and non-managers in general, and between top management and co-workers in particular. In other words, the two groups of change recipients – middle managers and co-workers – made sense of the top managerial sensegiving attempts differently (e.g. Sonenshein, 2010).

Here, we argue, the ‘change recipient sensemaking’ (Balogun & Johnson, 2005) of the middle managers seemed to be aligned with top management’s intentions (as described to us). Both on the level of talk and the level of meanings and emotions. For example, in relation to the journey metaphor, while the middle management acknowledged the challenges ahead, the balance acts on the way (e.g. strategic flexibility and managing competing interests) and some of its imperfections (e.g. limited time, high workload and scarce resources), we were given the impression that they shared the meanings and understandings of top management.

For example, the middle managers argued, in concert, that (constant) change (and/or continuously adapting to pressures in its external environment) was inevitable if Swedbank was to stay competitive (e.g. ‘change or die’), that the banking future was spelled digital and that it, when its co-workers had learnt to work ‘smart’ and when its customers had learnt to ‘use the bank in the right way’, would lead to both higher employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction (in a harmonious, self-reinforcing whole), and that high cost-efficiency (and/or lowering of overhead costs) was necessary to hedge against unforeseen, future risks (often

along narratives of that ‘the alternative would be worse’, and pointing towards a shipwreck). In addition, as signaled in the previous section, the journey that Swedbank had embarked on was dressed in a positive vocabulary by the middle managers, recurrently coupled with ideas of professional development along the lines of ‘a lot of exciting things going on’.

Further, in relation to the boat metaphor, while the middle management acknowledged that ‘it may symbolize different things for co-workers than for me [as a manager]’ and that it, with a particular reference to the mailing by the Head of Swedish Banking (see pp.76-77), may be understood to have been given a negative rather than a positive frame (i.e. claiming that some co-workers are in the water and that they make the journey troublesome for others, along with that they had to be worked with), it seemed to make sense for them. Either you are in (development), or you are out (settlement). That is the rules of the (Swedbank) game.

However, in contrast, when including the voices of the co-workers, the ‘receiving end’ (Bartunek et al. 2006), the managerial picture become more fragmented (and/or colorful, if you like). Parallels may here be drawn to Huzzard, Hellström and Lifvergren’s (2014) article on a strategic change implementation, in which a top managerial metaphor was made sense of differently among different change recipients as they drew on different discourses. Or, in the words of Weick (1995), the cue meant different things as it was put in different frames (in which the metaphor functioned as the connection). However, in Huzzard, Hellström and Lifvergren’s (2014) article, the recipients of the sensegiving attempts were middle managers, but their findings are echoed in our findings: some were cognitively and emotionally aligned, some were ambivalent, and some were indifferent or skeptical to the managerial metaphor.

For example, in relation to the journey metaphor, with reference to the digitization, two main issues may be argued to have surfaced in the narratives told by the co-workers: the pace of change and the relationship between digitization and customer satisfaction. In terms of the first issue, the pace of change, it was narrated as if it was both too slow and too fast – that the digitization of customers was more ‘slow-moving’ than it had been narrated to them by managerial others, and that ‘the (Swed)Bank’ pushed too hard, too fast.

However, on this issue, it may be argued to have been an alignment on the level of talk between middle managers and co-workers, that Swedbank was ‘ahead of its customers’. But, while the middle managers, alike the top managers, argued that the ‘digital transformation’ had accelerated in pace during the year, driven by, in the words of the Head of the Region, ‘radically changed customer behaviors’, it seemed as if that storyline did not fit the storyline

of the co-workers. The perceived lack of plausibility (Weick, 1995) in the managerial story may, perhaps, be understood in light of that, in the ongoing flow of the everyday ‘Swedbank experience’, the co-workers extracted cues such as that their calendars were fully-booked several weeks ahead – no need for ‘proactivity’ – and that there were more customers at the branches to get customer service than before having embarked on the journey of digitization (which, later, was confirmed by management – but suggested to be a period of transition).

Further, by the same token, as ‘digitization’ had been part of Swedbank’s vocabulary for some years at the time of this study (e.g. ‘digital revolution’, Swedbank, 2013, p.8) and that the co-workers said to not have experienced any dramatic digitization related changes in their everyday work during that period, this might further enhance our understanding of why some of them defined the situation in which they found themselves as business as usual (cf. ‘stability narrative’, Sonenshein, 2010) and/or that they did not ‘see’ the digitization. In other words, the co-workers’ past experiences of digitization, or the lack thereof (beyond the level of talk), may have framed their sensemaking in the present when attempting to come to terms with what the heck was going on (cf. Weick, 1995).

However, we argue, to not ‘see’ something is not to be put on par with that it did not exist (or that it was a result of pure ignorance), it may also be understood as the co-workers – or others – did not know what to look for. Accordingly, perhaps, such account may be a call for ‘help’ to see (e.g. ‘sensegiving imperatives’, Corley & Gioia, 2004), rather than being a manifestation of resistance and/or ignorance (Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008). In the words of Pondy (1978, p.94), ‘to give others a sense of understanding of what they are doing, and especially to articulate it, so they can communicate about the meaning of their behavior’.

Now, after having tried to make plausible sense of the variation in meaning in relation to the pace of the change journey, we address the second issue of particular interest on the topic of digitization: the relationship between digitization and customer satisfaction. Here, as elaborated on previously, while the middle management acknowledged an understanding of a perceived tension between digitization and customer satisfaction in the short term, they were confident that it, over time, would bring about higher customer satisfaction.

However, here, the majority of the co-workers we talked to framed the issue as if the digitization and customer satisfaction do not necessarily go ‘hand in hand’. At least not if it is to be understood in a context in which, in tandem, it was argued, the customers who want to meet the bank in person gets ‘pushed’ into other channels (e.g. telephone bank or internet

bank) and/or have to wait several weeks for the next available time slot (which, by the way, as the local branch is closed, is at a branch located in another city and with a new advisor). They do not accept cash and now they do not want to meet me in person? What the heck? What are banks for, then (some may ask)?

This issue is, however, and as discussed in brief before, multifaceted. For example, we were given the impression that what the co-workers enjoyed the most with their work, in addition to their colleagues, was to meet customers. And, as one of the co-workers said, and which was echoed in the other co-workers' stories as well, 'if the customer is happy, then I am happy'. Here, in light of the way in which the co-workers theorized the digitization in discourse, it seemed as if one of their guiding images was: the more the customer is digitized, the less I will meet customers (and, thus, the less I will do one of the things I enjoy the most). Since this activity was framed as their main task and dressed in a positive vocabulary, it may be argued to have been a central source of (work) identity (Weick, 1995) – 'and the risk of losing touch with this was a source of worry' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p.74).

Further, by the same token, following Weick (1995), when individuals make sense of the situation in which they find themselves, they strive to maintain a positive, competent and consistent sense of self. And to define the situation (or problem) is also to define the self (Weick, 1995, p.20). Here, we suggest, that the co-workers defined the problem of customer satisfaction, or its causes, along with the lines of that 'the customers are dissatisfied because they do not get to meet me and my colleagues to the extent, or as fast, as they want'. Thus, in line with this logic, to improve the 'lead times' and the accessibility (to me) is to solve the problem, as I make customers satisfied.

However, we argue, while none of the middle managers would argue against that the co-workers in their organization, as a rule, are competent and have the customers best interest at heart (sometimes too much, named 'to sit in the lap of the customers'), this solution is not cost-efficient. As one of the managers said, 'this is not a warming house, but a business'. In other words, if unpacking phrases such as 'resistant to change' or 'do not like digitization', the 'resistance' may, perhaps, be understood as being less about change and/or digitization per se, and more about the perceived potential loss of a central source of identity, self-esteem and social recognition (Weick, 1995). In addition, we argue, the perceived clash of interests may have been further (re)produced in light of that the co-workers narrated the digitization

as if it entailed a personal vendetta – (wo)man against machine. This along the lines of ‘I know my customers, do you think that a machine can make them more satisfied than I can?’.

Furthermore, to proceed on the path of making plausible sense of why some of the co-workers narrated the change as something negative or, to use our vocabulary, an exploitative experience (cf. ‘regressive narrative’, Sonenshein, 2010), this might be understood in light of that the symbolism embedded in the discourse of the ‘digital transformation’ did not only include ideas of ‘the more digitized, the less I will meet customers’ but also, in turn, that ‘the less I will be needed’. And, on the backdrop of that nearly one third of Swedbank’s branches had been closed during a four year period (from 314 to 218, Swedbank, 2018a) and that the number of staff working in its branches followed the same trend during that period (from 5004 to 3980, telephone bank staff and support staff included, Swedbank, 2018a), this may be argued to not solely have been an outcome of ‘vivid imagination’ – but part of its material reality (cf. ‘enactment’, Weick, 1995). In the words of the Head of the Region:

“We close branches and we are fewer who work at them. Then you [as a co-worker] might think that ‘it will only be a matter of time until it is my turn’ [...] This is a part of our cost focus. For example, if you are 10 at a branch and two decides to quit, then only one of them is replaced. As the managers need to rationalize its business. [...] I think that [Branch B] was a 20-man office some ten years ago. Now, it is 7 to 8.”

In other words, this fact (and its surplus meaning, Riceour, 1976), along with that, at the time of this study, it seemed to be a particularly challenging period (e.g. implementation of new regulatory frameworks and, thus, new working methods and internal training which ‘interrupt[ed] an ongoing flow’ of the organizational experience, Weick, 1995, p.100), may provide clues to why some co-workers dressed the ‘Swedbank experience’ in the vocabulary of that ‘it was better in the past’ (cf. ‘grief cycle’, Smollan, 2014) or, in relation to the boat journey metaphor, that it felt as if one was ‘drowning’ (cf. ‘sense of powerlessness and losing control’, Smollan, 2014, p.798; Vince & Broussine, 1996).

Now, in a next step, after having discussed the change journey and surfaced some of the potential underlying reasons of why some of the co-workers narrated it as a movement from a better state to a lesser state, we turn the limelight to the boat metaphor. As discussed previously (see p.112), the boat metaphor embodied notions such as togetherness (i.e. ‘to sit in the same boat’), shared goals and understandings (i.e. ‘to row in the same direction’), and that ‘[managers] need to work with those [co-workers] who are not in the boat’. Here, while

both managers and co-workers acknowledged the two former propositions (and said that the local organization fulfilled both), the core message conveyed with the image, it was argued, may be understood to have centred around the third proposition. And here, we argue, both the cognitive and the emotional responses diverged between the two recipient groups.

As discussed previously, while the middle managers did acknowledge that the image may symbolize different things for different people and that it may be understood to have been given a negative rather than a positive frame, the ‘up [in the boat] or out’ (cf. Morgan, 2001) rhetoric was framed as legitimate and justified along the lines of ‘that is simply how it is [in business]’. In addition, while they did confirm that, in practice, the categorization of promoters, passives and detractors was not an unproblematic or unambiguous enterprise, the middle managers defined the situation as if they perceived themselves to have the knowledge to determine what is what: who is in the boat or not, and who is rowing and who is not. And, in light of their formal position (of power), it may be argued that they, alike the top managers, had ‘an unequally strong position to influence the construction of social reality’ (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.418). Thus, the managers enjoyed an interpretive prerogative in the power play of discourse (cf. Alvesson & Due Billing, 2009; Morgan, 2001).

When including the voices of the co-workers into the (boat) conversation, the picture, again, become more fragmented and colorful. As the idea of togetherness (i.e. the ‘we’) was a recurrent theme in the discourse of ‘who we are and how we do things around here [in the local organization]’, and that ‘making customers satisfied’ was a shared mantra among the co-workers, it seemed to make (obvious) sense that the co-workers were (already) sitting in the boat and did (already) row in the same direction (however, some more than others). In other words, from the perspective of the co-workers, the managerial image may be argued to have provided answers to a question that nobody had asked (cf. Weick, 1995).

Further, in relation to the proposition that ‘we have to work with those who are not in the boat’, some of the co-workers described the rhetoric (and imagery) as harsh and unfair. This as the co-workers, among other things, perceived that they did the best they could under the conditions they were given and that too much responsibility was put on the individual co-worker (that clung on the side of the boat). Spurring questions such as: what do you as a manager do about it, to help us up and to make us want to join the ride? In addition, some co-workers perceived the ‘up or out’ rhetoric as demoralizing and, thus, to spark a feeling of being (easily) replaceable as, to quote one of the co-workers, it propelled and legitimized the

middle managers to say that ‘it is perfectly fine for you to look for another job’, instead of saying ‘you know what, we need you here [and, therefore, want you to stay]’ (p.99).

In other words, to briefly sum up the main points made in this section so far, the two groups of recipients – the middle managers and the co-workers – did not only theorize the top managerial metaphors differently in discourse but, we argue, our findings indicate that it was coupled with a variation in cognitive and emotional dimensions as well. Furthermore, here, another finding was that the cognitive and the emotional dimensions of metaphor may sometimes be in conflict. For example, on the one hand, one of the co-workers said that s/he was in the boat, with reference to the strong ‘we-feeling’ in the local organization. But, on the other hand, it did not feel as if s/he was in the boat, because it felt as if s/he was drowning (being in or under the water). Thus, we suggest, metaphor in change work may not only be understood as an intellectual activity, but embody as much heart as head (cf. Smollan, 2014).

In the rest of this section of discussion, we continue to make sense of top managerial metaphor and, lastly, we engage in some alternative reading of the variation in meanings and emotions. According to Riad (2011) and scholarly others (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018), the meaning of a metaphor may be framed by the story, or narrative, in which it is grounded. In other words, dependent on the trajectory of the narrative (e.g. progressive, regressive or stability, Sonenshein, 2010) it may mean different things and, in the words of Riad (2011, p.385), ‘[be used] towards different ends’. As the co-workers, in contrast to the managers, primarily used a regressive narrative when theorizing the change journey in discourse, it may be argued that this image provides the conceptual canvas against which the sense of the boat metaphor is made (cf. ‘part-whole hermeneutic circle’, Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p.159).

Furthermore, by the same token, following Ford and Ford (1995), dependent on the type of conversation, the managerial metaphor may mean different things. Here, as the co-workers narrated the change as feeling excluded from the (change) conversation itself, this, along with the type of narrative in which it is grounded as mentioned earlier, may bring about a plausible understanding to the cognitive and emotional variation in the sense made of the managerial metaphors. That how a managerial metaphor is constructed and made sense of, and the emotions evoked, may depend on the type of conversation (or lack thereof) in which it is part (Ford & Ford, 1995) and in what kind of narrative it is grounded (Riad, 2011).

In turn, following Bartunek et al. (2006), and to articulate a label that may function as a sensitizing concept to understand why the two recipient groups of the sensegiving attempts

constructed competing narratives, it may have been influenced by that the perceived personal impact of the change differed among the two groups of individuals. In light of that the change recipients held different formal positions which include different duties and responsibilities, it may be argued that they, on a group level, were affected differently by the change.

For example, from a middle managerial perspective, in which one of their main tasks is to explain, guide and legitimize top-down change in the eyes of organizational others (i.e. ‘to successfully and effectively lead employees through change’, Swedbank, 2018, p.16), they may be argued to (have to) support any aspect of change or, at least, appearing to be supporting them. Or, put it the other way around, a middle manager that is not championing change would probably not survive in that position for a very long time. The idea of ‘role-taking’ and/or being the ‘messenger’ of top management is captured by the following quotes:

“Sometimes you just have to go into the role [...] You have managed it damn good if another manager says to you: ‘It nearly sounds as if you are convinced that this is the right way’. Then you have succeeded. But, afterward, I also have to stand up for that position, with that façade in relation to my organization, so that they gain confidence in me and, consequently, decide to follow me’ – Branch Manager A

“I am the messenger of top management. I have to stand behind the decisions that the bank makes. [...] I am only a small piece in the big puzzle.” – Branch Manager A

In contrast, for the majority of the co-workers that we talked to, both ‘settlement’ and ‘development’ was dressed in a vocabulary of involving threats rather than opportunities. In terms of the first ‘path’, it would, despite of its imperfections, include to leave a job that they enjoyed and, in particular, leave colleagues and a social context that they appreciated. And it would also include going into something uncertain, perhaps unemployment. Secondly, if choosing to stay, it (was said to) include something beyond business as usual. For example, a need for extensive education to being able to deliver more qualified kinds of services.

To this, which we have signaled previously as well, we find it important to highlight that not all co-workers narrated the digitization journey as something negative. And here, we argue, the perceived personal impact (cf. Bartunek et al. 2006), or self-interest, may hold an explanatory potential. For example, among the two co-workers whos narratives were the most aligned with the managers, one of them was soon retiring and the other one was at the beginning of her/his career, valuing ‘career opportunities’ the most, which s/he perceived that Swedbank offered. In contrast, the co-workers who were the most openly skeptical were

all middle-aged and lacked, for example, merits of higher education. Thus, and in light of their narratives collected (and interpreted), it may be argued that both further (internal) training and unemployment was perceived to be more ‘threatening’ for them.

Regarding the role of the perceived fit between the metaphorical framing of strategic change and the change recipients’ self-interest, or motives, to secure support and legitimacy for the change, parallels may here be drawn to one of Cornelissen, Holt and Zundel’s (2011) propositions for the ‘effective’ use of managerial metaphors of change. Here, they argue that the more (or less) a metaphorical frame is aligned with the self-interest of the recipients of change, the higher (or lower) the ascribed legitimacy and support for the change initiative. In our case, on the backdrop of that the managerial frame was perceived by some of the co-workers to be in conflict with their self-interest, along with that the ‘message’ was perceived to be wrapped in a harsh rhetoric, this may provide some additional clues to understand the variations among the change recipient on the level of talk, cognitions and emotions.

Furthermore, another proposition suggested by Cornelissen, Holt and Zundel (2011, p.1710) is that ‘the relationship between the framing of strategic change and its perceived legitimacy is moderated by the cultural familiarity of the frame’. The more (or less) the frame is culturally familiar (and taken-for-granted), the higher (or lower) the ascribed legitimacy, they argue. But what if a familiar source domain mainly, in the wider cultural community in which the organizational members are part and/or highly idiosyncratic associations derived from past experiences of socialization, evokes negative cognitions and emotions? In other words, an alternative interpretation of the variation in responses among the change recipients may be that it is less about the target domain, and more about the source domain.

For example, what if a co-worker’s, or any others, main associations with journeys are negative? And/or that the individual’s main associations with boats are seasickness, or being afraid of the ocean? In addition, in a Swedish context (as this plot plays out), we argue that journeys and boats may be understood to be part of a larger cultural fabric, above and beyond the walls of Swedbank. And, in our view, the latter mainly embody negative connotations, such as ‘we are in the same boat’ (i.e. ‘to be in the same unpleasant situation’), ‘sit down in the boat’ (i.e. ‘calm down’), and/or ‘out and sailing’ (i.e. ‘be utterly confused’). Further, by the same token, when a person in a relative position of power says ‘we are in the same boat’ to a person in a position of lesser power, the latter person is urged to be aware, as it means

that the person in the position of relative power wants to be the captain and, thus, that the person in a lesser position of power is going to have to do the rowing.

As the last point in this section on making sense of managerial metaphor, the variation in meanings and emotions among the recipients of the sensegiving attempts may perhaps not only be colored by what is said (i.e. the content), but also by who is communicating it (i.e. the sender) (e.g. Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008). In light of that the co-workers, in contrast to the managers, voiced things such as 'they [the top management] do not know how it is to work in bank branches' and 'their [the top management] only concern is numbers', along with that the idea of 'we [the local organization] and them [top management and the rest of the world]' seemed, at least to some extent, be propelled in the everyday discursive practices (to be discussed in the next section), this may also provide clues to its variation among the recipients. In other words, perhaps, independent of what top management had said, some of the receivers had been skeptical – as it was the top management who said it.

5.1.4 Managerial metaphors in practice

Now, in the last part of this chapter on metaphors and the symbolic management of change, after having discussed managerial metaphors in the discourse of strategic change on the level of text (section 5.1.2) and on the level of meaning and emotions (section 5.1.3), we turn the limelight to the level of practice (Kärreman, 2014). The third research subquestion that we posed was: How are the managerial metaphors enacted in practice? This section is divided into three themes. Firstly, we discuss what we referred to as 'the life on the boat' (subchapter 4.6) and connects it to the first illustrative example (i.e. 'The Breakdown'). Secondly, we discuss social sensemaking processes on the backdrop of the second illustrative example (i.e. 'The Retrospection'). And thirdly, and lastly, we surface some of the problems, pitfalls and limitations of managerial metaphor in change work in light of the third illustrative example.

As explored in the previous chapter, the middle managers were constructed by the top managers and by themselves to be key change agents – or captains – on Swedbank's journey of change towards its Wanted Position. In addition, while the co-workers, on the one hand, said that they worked autonomously, were self-motivated and in limited need of leadership, they, on the other hand, somewhat ironically, constructed their managers as central figures and imposed, we argue, quite high expectations, responsibilities and demands on them.

In the discourse of change, four distinct managerial roles ‘emerged’ in our empirical material. Here, we played with the boat metaphor and suggested that the four roles could be understood metaphorically as ‘pointing the way forward’ (i.e. talk about strategies, goals and change), ‘rowing’ (i.e. role modeling), ‘going down on deck’ (i.e. being a ‘culture bearer’, Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p.96), and, most importantly, ‘keeping the boat afloat’ (i.e. administrative excellence, cf. Balogun, 2003). Roles which, according to both managers and co-workers, all had to be part of the managerial repertoire and balanced in everyday work to champion the middle managerial function of being a ‘change intermediary’ (Balogun, 2003).

In the discourse of (strategic) change, the role of ‘pointing the way forward’, which is captured by a quote from one of its annual reports, ‘managers have to point the way forward and implement changes’ (Swedbank, 2014, p.10), may be understood to have been the role among the four that was the most coupled with symbolic acts of communication and, thus, the ‘management of meaning’ (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). A middle managerial role that embodied notions that could, we suggested, in light of the narratives told, be sorted under two subcategories: explaining and motivating (and, here, parallels were recurrently drawn to one of Swedbank’s leadership criteria, being clear in communication, see pp.76-77).

This to answer the ‘why-question’, to bring about both acceptance and understanding among its co-workers (cf. Cornelissen, Holt & Zundel, 2011; Fiss & Zajac, 2006), or crew, to get them aboard on the (boat on the) journey of change and to, in addition, mobilize an adequate supply of discursive, cognitive and emotional resources to make the ride as smooth and ‘effective’ as possible (cf. Morgan, 1988). However, while the middle managers, on the one hand, highlighted the importance of providing a forceful ‘rationale for why’ to legitimize and rationalize the top managerial agenda in the head (and hearts) of organizational others (and self), this was, on the other hand, by no means an unproblematic enterprise.

Here, from a symbolic management perspective (cf. Siehl & Martin, 1984), we argued that the middle managers struggled with the ‘why-question’ in the context of the digitization journey that Swedbank had embarked on. We even constructed it as a ‘managerial dilemma’. And to ‘solve’ this dilemma, we argued that the managerial discursive strategies used could be sorted into two subcategories: ‘non-symbolic’ and ‘symbolic’. If using a non-symbolic discursive strategy, the middle managers used their legitimate power to push it through. As it, in the words of one of the Branch managers, sometimes is ‘too much consensus’ and that it ‘is the employer who decides where to go, what goals [to pursue] and how to get there’.

In contrast, the second subcategory, symbolic discursive strategies (cf. ‘sensegiving’, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), we suggested that it could be divided into two types: ‘positive framing’ and ‘negative framing’ (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Here, we argued that the middle managers (and the co-workers) were preoccupied with using a negative frame (e.g. threats) when theorizing the strategic change in discourse, rather than using a positive frame (e.g. opportunities) (e.g. Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Fiss & Zajac, 2006).

Furthermore, we argued that while our empirical material was, in general, packed with symbolism, neither the Wanted Position nor the life in the boat (during the journey) were ‘envisioned’ in metaphorical terms (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al. 1994). Here, to conceptually capture this phenomenon, we referred to what Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015, p.178) label ‘symbolic anorexia’. And we suggested that the managers seemed to be ‘trapped’ in the breaking of frames (i.e. ‘sensebreaking’, Pratt, 2000), calling for the change recipients to reimagine their organizational reality and their place within it, and struggled to ‘fill the gap’ with new, energizing meanings (i.e. ‘sensegiving’, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Here, in our view, it seemed as if Swedbank’s ‘main vision in recent years had simply been survival’ (Morgan, 2001, p.96). In the words of its CEO, ‘now, you may ask, have we not achieved this [the Wanted Position] already? Yes, we have. But we will not be able to maintain this position if we do not have the ability to adjust our operations to meet the new needs of our customers’ (Swedbank, 2017b, p.2). A quote that was echoed in a statement by the Head of the Region, ‘when you come out on the other side and still has this position – that is the big challenge’ (p.98). And in the local organization, its inhabitants seemed to be ‘more worried about their jobs than developing a transformational picture of the future, [...] to come through this survival period’ (Morgan, 2001, p.96).

In addition, in light of the narratives collected (and interpreted), we suggested that the middle managers recurrently drew symbolic resources from three different discourses, or (negative) frames, when trying to legitimize and rationalize the need for constant change in the eyes of organizational others (cf. Morgan & Spicer, 2009). Three negative frames which we labeled: the Bank, the Shipwreck, and the Myth (pp.100-103). However, for purpose of clarification, the labels of positive and negative are not to be put on par with that the former would be the more ‘effective’ of the two, it only refers to two different strategies in which the same course of action is promoted by enacting different versions of reality (Weick, 1995).

In light of the ‘symbolic anorexia’ (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015) in relation to the Wanted Position and the life on the boat during the journey (beyond ‘the more digitized, the less I will be needed’), along with the tendency to use a negative frame when theorizing the need for ‘keep on rowing’ (e.g. dragons, sharks, shipwrecks, Atlantic Liners to crush the rowing boat and the risk of ending up overboard) (cf. Fairhurst, 2011), we acknowledge the difficulties and ambiguities involved if middle managers would, to a greater extent, answer the Head of the Region’s call to be more ‘creative’ (cf. ‘imaginization’, Morgan, 1993), to ‘fill the gap’ with positive meaning through symbolic language games (cf. Pondy, 1978).

Because, on the one hand, we argue, the top managerial vision of Swedbank did not supply the middle managers with much positive, prospective symbolic discursive resources to work with (cf. Gioia et al. 1994). Secondly, on the other hand, we argue, if the managerial sensegiving attempts would, among its recipients, be perceived to be too ‘decoupled’ from their lived experiences, it may spur even more cynicism and skepticism (e.g. Smollan, 2014). Thirdly, and linked to the two former points, while every aspect of organizational life may be equally symbolic (cf. Pfeffer, 1981), there are limits to what allows itself to be talked into (or out of) existence – limits to what allows itself to be wished into (or out of) existence (cf. Alvesson, 2002; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

For example, how much help is a sexy signifier (e.g. a metaphor) if it feels as if one is drowning? How much help is an inspiring vision (e.g. a paradise island in the horizon) if it feels as if the boat is taking in water? And if understanding the birth of and preoccupation in symbolic management and/or corporate culture management in the modern organization in its material and socio-historical context (e.g. Alvesson & Berg, 1992), it did not come about in conversations between equals nor without being a substitute for something (substantive) else. To quote Alvesson (1990, p.375), ‘it is when the content of work and the organization do not speak for themselves, that images [i.e. symbolism] are given systematic attention’.

Now, to connect this elaboration on managerial metaphor of change in practice to our first illustrative example, ‘The Breakdown’ (p.104), it seems to us as if the lack of alignment in meanings and understandings among the managers and the co-workers of how to interpret the question ‘would you [as an employee] recommend Swedbank as an employer to a friend or colleague’ presented itself as an opening for manipulation of meaning (cf. ‘sensegiving imperative’, Corley & Gioia, 2004; ‘sensegiving gap’, Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Here, at the quarterly meeting in the Branch Area, the regional manager was reported to have defined

what aspects of the ‘Swedbank experience’ to include and what to exclude when answering the question (cf. ‘criteria for plausible stories’, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.418). Highlighting the positive (e.g. professional development, what now that means) and, by the same act, suppressing the negative (e.g. low salary, short on staff and branches closing).

However, the managerial sensegiving attempt met resistance among the co-workers. And it was described to have resulted in an even larger gap in meanings and understandings between top management, middle management and co-workers in relation to the question (and, in addition, to (re)quote one of the Branch managers, ‘I do not think that we have had such bad results before [as we had after that meeting]’, p.105). In other words, here, the co-workers did not accept the (non)sense given by the top manager. And instead of, as intended, ‘closing the gap’, the gap in meanings and understandings became even larger between the groups of individuals, and the eNPS survey question has since then, we were told, been a particularly symbolically-laden activity in the local organization, with political undertones.

This event, we argue, problematizes the concept of sensegiving (and the management of meaning in general) and raises questions such as how, when and to what extent managers are able to, in an instrumental fashion, ‘manage’ the sensemaking of others to, in turn, create systems of shared meanings and understandings (which, according to much of the literature in our theoretical framework, is framed as critical for ‘effective’ change work, e.g. Fairhurst, 2011; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Marshak, 1993a; Schein, 2010).

Furthermore, during the course of our project, there appeared to be inconsistencies in meanings and understandings around several issues and events in the discourse of change. In other words, different interpretations of what is and what ought to be (and what have been) seemed to be the *modus operandi* in the local organization in relation to the change journey that Swedbank had embarked on (cf. ‘ambiguity paradigm’, Meyerson & Martin, 1987). However, in contrast to some of the established ‘truths’ in the change management literature, despite the misalignments in meanings and understandings among the groups of individuals, both branches under (closest) study was reported by the middle managers to perform very well on both change accomplishment measure (e.g. rate of digitized customers) and financial measures. In support of this claim, at one of the quarterly meetings that we observed, top managerial representatives expressed satisfaction regarding their performance as well.

In other words, although having their differences in meanings and understandings, the change recipients fulfilled their daily duties and responsibilities par excellence. Surely, we

can speculate around if the local organization would have performed even better if all the co-workers would, to use the vocabulary of Sonenshein (2010, p.500), be change champions (i.e. progressive narrative) and/or change accepting (i.e. progressive or stability narrative) rather than change resisting (i.e. regressive narrative).

However, to draw a parallel to Swedbank's Employee Net Promoter Score survey (i.e. employees as promoters, passives or detractors, pp.76-77), if allowing ourselves to be a bit cynical, of how much (instrumental) value is a promoter, and/or a progressive narrative, for Swedbank if the individual in question lacks the 'right' competency and/or knowledge (to deliver high sales numbers and customer satisfaction)? Or, as signaled in the introduction of the previous chapter, is perhaps Swedbank's (2018, p.189) 'knowledge-intensive[ness]' not that intensive and, to quote one of the Branch managers, 'motivation beats competency' the language of a company who cannot (afford to) have both? That, in the modern organization, 'motivation' is not only a surrogate for meaning (Sievers, 1986), but for competency as well?

Anyhow, we argue, our findings indicate that behavioral compliance among recipients of change in change work is not necessarily an outcome of shared meanings, understandings, and emotions. Or, to make a more modest claim, to narrate resistance (cf. Sonenshein, 2010) in an interview situation is not to be put on par with that, of different reasons, these meanings, understandings, and emotions are enacted in practice (cf. Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

Somewhat (un)surprisingly, in the modern ideal of living to work (cf. Alvesson, 2013a; Paulsen, 2014), a lot of more or less sophisticated forms of disciplining mechanisms may be at play in contemporary organizations, both externally and internally imposed (cf. Mumby, 2005). From traditional forms of control (cf. Weber, 1947), to concertive control (cf. Barker, 1993), to '[just] be yourself' (cf. Bolton et al. 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Here, to play with the boat metaphor, what if the trajectory is managerially predefined? What if we would think of the boat journey as a log flume, and the managerial symbolic management attempts the noise in the background to drawn attention from the fact that this is the last ride?

Further, under conditions of (voluntary derived) shared meanings and understandings, if understood in its sociomaterial context (cf. Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) in which it is said to come about, we question if it is always possible (and/or ethical) to act on such sharedness? In other words, how much are aligned meanings on what is going on, shared understandings on what to do and emotional states in tune worth if it is not practically possible to enact such

meanings, understandings, and emotions? Or, in the first place, if no opportunities are given to engage in such dialogue, to arrive at consent (cf. Morgan, 2001)?

Now, as the next step in this section, after having discussed and reflected on ‘the life on the boat’ and connected it to our first illustrative example, ‘The Breakdown’, we address the social dimensions of sensemaking processes in light of our second illustrative example, ‘The Retrospection’. To set the stage, a (re)quote by Corvellec and Risberg (2007, p.322), ‘it is non-sensical to speak of sense without referring to interpretation and, thus, to a living audience’. As illustrated in the previous chapter, making sense of what is and what ought to be (and what have been) in the context of change work is a somewhat (un)surprisingly social activity (cf. Bartunek et al. 1999; Helms Mills, 2003; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995).

For example, the top-down strategic initiatives communicated by top management to the middle management was said to be discussed, negotiated and modified along informal, horizontal levels of the organization (i.e. ‘inter-recipient sensemaking’, Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Both in the everyday practices among the middle managers in the local management team and when, among other things, the middle managers were on ‘leadership conferences’ in Stockholm and/or gatherings on a regional level.

Further, particularly in communication between the middle management and the co-workers, we were given the impression that the middle managers, on the backdrop of their understanding of the co-workers’ cognitions and emotions, modified their communication (which they sometimes referred to as ‘situational leadership’) along with being attentive to feedback from the receiving end. In the words of one of the Branch managers, ‘I mean, I am very influenced by my co-workers, I always ask for feedback’.

In other words, (strategic) sense given by top management to middle management is not only (re)interpreted and negotiated between middle managers along horizontal levels (cf. Balogun & Johnson, 2005), but also (re)interpreted and negotiated between middle managers and co-workers along vertical levels of the organization as well. Here, in terms of the latter, parallels may be drawn to what Maitlis (2005) refers to as ‘organizational sensemaking’, and what Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p.434) refer to as ‘[ongoing] cycles of negotiated social construction’ (i.e. ‘an iterative, reciprocal cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving’).

In other words, while acknowledging that some powerful groups in the organization (e.g. the upper echelon) may be argued to hold an unequally strong position to influence the construction of social reality (cf. Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010; Weick, Sutcliffe &

Obstfeld, 2005), it is (alike the sensemaking-sensegiving practices, or relationship, itself), at least to some extent, a co-construction (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). And, for example, when sense is ‘given’ to a co-worker – or, reasonably, any other knowledgeable agent – it is not simply ‘taken’, but (re)interpreted, negotiated (among peers and others) and sometimes championed, sometimes accepted, and sometimes resisted (Sonenshein, 2010).

Now, to link this elaboration to the second illustrative example, ‘The Retrospection’, we suggested that (social) sensemaking and sensegiving practices were at play along both vertical and horizontal levels of the organization. Firstly, as increased employee engagement – in which employee satisfaction may be understood to be part – was one of Swedbank’s key strategic goals as this was assumed to ‘contribute to a successful business and satisfied customers’ (Swedbank, 2018a, p.10), the middle managers were continuously evaluated on this dimension and were, by the top management, expected to take action to realize this goal. The middle managerial initiative to put this issue on the agenda of the quarterly meeting and ask (half of) the co-workers in the Branch Area to, beforehand, discuss in groups and prepare answers to questions on employee engagement may, thus, be understood on that background.

However, as illustrated, the co-workers that we talked to before the meeting voiced a rather skeptical view regarding both the initiative in itself (e.g. extra administrative burden) and how they imagined that the upcoming meeting would play out (e.g. ‘take a five-minute discussion’, p.106). Here, the co-workers’ sensemaking may be argued to have been a result of their previous experiences of quarterly meetings (e.g. ‘only numbers’, p.106) and, in light of this, framed the initiative solely as a (negative) interruption of their flow of work which they, at the time, already struggled to cope with as it was (cf. Weick, 1995).

At the quarterly meeting, which we observed, around half of the time was allocated to discuss employee satisfaction (and, from the perspective of the insider researcher, when we discussed the meeting among ourselves the day after, he was of the opinion that, to use his own words, it had been somewhat of a ‘game changer’, in a positive sense). However, in the interviews with co-workers that we conducted during the period after the meeting, it was only dressed in a negative vocabulary – no discussion, mostly numbers, no decisions made, only some part of what the co-workers had prepared beforehand was included in the power point, leaving out all the negative things (cf. ‘framing’, Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), and so on.

Here, if sidestepping the question of what ‘really happened’ (cf. Dawson & Buchanan, 2005), it became evident that the co-workers at the respective branches, after the quarterly

meeting and in the absence of managers, had engaged in social sensemaking processes to make retrospective sense of the event (cf. 'inter-recipient sensemaking', Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). And, through these processes of socialization among the co-workers, the image of the meeting as an essentially negative experience seemed to have developed into a social fact (cf. Weick, 1995), in all its (plausible) partiality.

Further, in the interviews with middle managers that we conducted during the period after the meeting, the (social) sensemaking of the co-workers seemed to have 'looped back' to the senders of the sensegiving attempts (cf. 'the cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving', Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In other words, the recipients' sensemaking became input in the senders' sensemaking which seemed to have led to a retrospective (re)interpretation of the meeting in light of these cues and, perhaps, to a modification in future sensegiving attempts.

For example, one of the Branch managers was interviewed both before and after the meeting. Before the meeting, s/he dressed the initiative in itself (e.g. the questions to prepare in groups and to present and discuss the answers at the meeting) and the imagined outcome in a positive vocabulary along the lines of 'a great initiative', 'good input for us to get' and 'good for the co-workers to hear what others think' (p.106). However, in the interview after the meeting, s/he signaled an awareness of the negative experiences of the co-workers and, in addition, dressed how it all had played out in a more neutral and/or skeptical vocabulary. Here, s/he also hinted that there had been some disagreements in the local management team.

Furthermore, another practical example of the cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving along vertical levels of the organization (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), was with particular reference to the Head of Swedish Banking's boat metaphor (p.76). Here, in the discourse of the boat metaphor, when one of the Branch managers reconsidered to 'use the boat next time [at a meeting]', s/he used strong language when saying 'perhaps not the boat metaphor, they [the co-workers] hate the boat' (p.89). In other words, in light of the middle manager's image of the co-workers' cognitions and emotions coupled with the managerial metaphor, it seemed as if the manager was dubious about using it as a sensegiving device again.

However, and to bridge this elaboration on the, (un)surprisingly, social sensemaking and sensegiving practices with our last theme in this section of discussion, to highlight some of the problems, pitfalls and limitations of managerial metaphors in change work, it appeared as if, in light of that one of Swedbank's regional representatives used the boat metaphor at a quarterly meeting (p.109), the feedback loop of the end receivers' negative sensemaking had

not reached beyond the vertical level of middle management. A claim that may be argued to be supported by our observation that neither the Head of Swedish Banking nor the Head of the Region acknowledged any awareness of its negative symbolism.

In other words, the cues from the end receivers' (i.e. co-workers) sensemaking of the top managerial metaphor which, we suggest, had been negotiated in processes of informal socialization in the absence of middle managers, had not reached the top managerial level. Therefore, the top managers continued to use the boat metaphor in their communication as they seemed to be thinking that it embodied a positive, generative potential (cf. Schön, 1979) and a meaningful (and/or 'accurate') illustration of what is and what ought to be (and what have been) on Swedbank's change journey towards its Wanted Position (cf. Gioia et al. 1994; Marshak, 1993a; Morgan, 1988; Pondy, 1983; Sackmann, 1989).

An illustration which, in sum, we argue, highlights some of the difficulties involved when managers attempt to give sense to, or manage the meanings of, organizational others. Firstly, especially for top managers who engage in limited, if any, socialization with the local organization, it is tricky to construct a 'recipient awareness' and, thus, to adapt and/or modify the 'message' to the audience at hand (a challenge that the Head of Swedish Banking referred to as 'leading at a distance', and framed as 'one of the most difficult things you have to do').

Secondly, in the footsteps of Corvellec and Risberg (2007) and scholarly others (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Bartunek et al. 1999; 2006; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Sonenshein, 2010; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012), the recipients of the managerial 'message' are social, (inter)subjective interpretive agents. While managers, in their formal position of power, may, for example, be able to define the agenda of a meeting (e.g. Hardy, 1996) and, to a greater extent than less powerful other, control the cues for plausible stories (e.g. Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), it may be argued to be harder to regulate informal processes of socialization in which, at least in our case, a lot of the retrospective sensemaking seemed to come about, in the absence of managers (cf. Weick, 1995). In other words, that corporate-sponsored symbols and managerial metaphors take on 'a life of its own' (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p.445), we argue, is the rule – not the exception (and its outcomes on change work an empirical question, cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

Thirdly, to connect this elaboration more explicitly to the main point made in our third illustrative example, 'The Boat Journey?', the giving of sense to others does not come about in a vacuum – but in an imperfect (organizational) reality. In a meeting, or in any other social

situation in which individuals find themselves, to cope with and make sense of it in all its ambiguities, uncertainties and complexities (cf. Martin & Meyerson, 1988), a vast array of stimuli competes over the individual agents (bounded) cognitive resources (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Weick, 1995). For example, as in our case, the use of managerial metaphor in communication may pass unnoticed – even among its ‘believers’.

Here, on the one hand, studies in organization and management theory grounded in an interpretive paradigm of research (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) may be argued to, in principle, either explicitly or implicitly depart from the assumption, or position, of individual agents as ‘homo economicus’ (cf. ‘the rational [hu]man’, March & Simon, 1958). However, on the other hand, it seems to us as if a premium is put on the ‘conscious, thinking and reflective self’ (Prasad, 2018, p.27). What about mishearing, daydreaming, slips of tongue, unreflected use of (dead) metaphors in everyday speech, and so on? Are they not part of the (business) human condition and repertoire, we ask ourselves?

As a next, and final, step in this section on making sense of managerial metaphors in practice, we discuss two (somewhat ironic) counter-images on the canvas of our previous elaboration. Firstly, to set the scene for the first counter-image, a quote by one of the Branch managers, ‘I can understand that some [co-workers] think that it [the boat metaphor] is harsh rhetoric, but if you [as a manager] just explain, I think that the majority of them understand what it symbolizes’. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the middle managers’ in the local organization had, in brief, introduced the Head of Swedish Banking’s boat metaphor to the co-workers during one of their quarterly meetings (pp.80-81).

However, to our knowledge, neither the boat metaphor nor the journey metaphor had been explored in the sense of collectively, in dialogue between managers and co-workers in the local organization, having come to terms with how it may, or may not, be understood. For example, in relation to the journey metaphor, they had not discussed questions such as:

- Does it make sense to metaphorically conceptualize our strategic change as a journey?
- If yes, what kind of journey may it be understood as? How does the journey look like and feel like on the way? In what direction, if any, are we heading? Does the journey look like and feel like a movement towards a lesser state or a better state? And how does our final destination look like (and so on)?

Further, in relation to the boat metaphor, they had not discussed questions such as:

- If assuming that the strategic change may be understood as a journey, does it make sense to metaphorically conceptualize our organization as a boat (on a journey)?
- If yes, what kind of boat may it be understood as? If assuming that it makes sense to understand the organization as a rowing boat (as in the case of the Head of Swedish Banking's boat metaphor), how is the life on the boat? If assuming that we want the boat to move in the direction towards our final destination (and/or to just keep the boat afloat) and we, at least to some certainty, know in what direction the final destination is, what is important (and so on)?

In our view, while Palmer and Dunford (1996, p.711) called for 'adopting a reflexive approach to studying organizational metaphor', we argue that these kinds of questions, along with having a reflective approach to other issues which we have raised in this paper (and to be summarized in the next chapter), may pave the way for a reflexive approach to metaphor in change work in practice. However, following the empirical findings and suggestions by Huzzard, Hellström and Lifvergren (2014, p.214) along with drawing inspiration from ideas of the virtue of (purposeful) ambiguity in communication in change work (e.g. Eisenberg, 1984; Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012; Sonenshein, 2010), and its inevitability (cf. Weick, 1995, particularly if resorting to the use of metaphor, e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1986; Riceour, 1978), we do not, primarily, see metaphor in change work as a managerial device to, in an instrumental fashion, give sense to others to create systems of shared meanings and understandings (cf. Smircich, 1983a). But, in contrast, we see metaphor in change work as a device with the potential to, in conversation, build consensus on what is 'out there' and how it may be understood (and if, perhaps, it may be understood differently) (cf. Morgan, 1993).

However, we acknowledge that this approach is neither unproblematic to translate into practice nor without its ironies. For example, as illustrated in the previous chapter, the co-workers (and managers) seemed to struggle to cope with finding time to fulfill their ordinary duties, tasks, and responsibilities. And, in light of the narratives told by the co-workers, there was already limited scope to discuss substantive issues. Would it then, on this backdrop, be perceived as meaningful and/or legitimate to discuss journeys and boats among the actors involved? Would it (re)produce a managerialist agenda, or would it facilitate emancipation?

Furthermore, as a second counter-image, to (re)connect to the previous elaboration on some of the difficulties involved with managing the meanings of others (e.g. lack of recipient awareness and metaphors 'taking a life of its own'), we wonder – does it matter? What if the Head of Swedish Banking and/or the Head of the Region would have had knowledge about

that the boat metaphor spurred negative cognitions and emotions among some of the end receivers, would it change anything? What if the metaphor, primarily, was by managers and for (only) managers to consume? What if, following Fleming and Spicer (2003), and in light of that both branches under study performed par excellence, that the inconsistencies in meanings and understandings were functional? That it provided a sense of autonomy among the individuals but, if putting their behaviors under scrutiny, they ‘still practice the corporate rituals nevertheless’ (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, p.160)?

As a last step in this chapter, to draw inspiration from what Alvesson and Spicer (2016, p.232) refer to as ‘bullshit bingo’, we suggest a heuristic (and vocabulary) by intersecting two dimensions – lived experience and symbolism – that, we argue, may be used to ‘reality test’ managerial metaphors in organizations, from the perspective of a recipient.

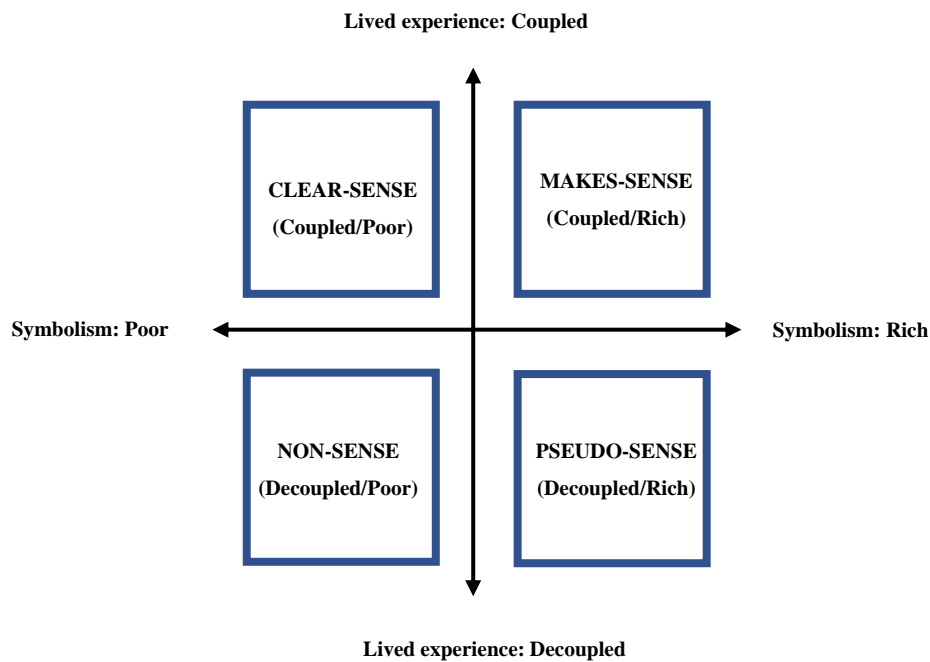


Figure 8. Managerial metaphor in practice, a reality test.

As we described in our theoretical framework, a metaphor is a linguistic artefact that provides a cognitive bridge between two dissimilar domains (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) – a cognitive bridge (connection) between a target domain (cue) and a source domain (frame) (cf. Weick, 1995). The first dimension of the two, lived experience, refers to the perceived relation (or the lack thereof) between the target domain and the proposed connection. In our model, the relation may be either coupled or decoupled. The second dimension, symbolism,

refers to the symbolic content (including the discursive, cognitive and emotional resources) embedded in the source domain. In our model, the content may be either rich or poor.

If combining these two dimensions, it produced four different positions to managerial metaphor from a recipient perspective:

- Makes-sense (coupled/rich). If a managerial metaphor makes-sense, it is perceived to be coupled with the lived experience it is suggested to correspond to and the symbolic content of the source domain is rich (cf. ‘generative potential’, Schön, 1979).
- Clear-sense (coupled/poor). If a managerial metaphor makes clear-sense, it is perceived to be coupled with the lived experience it is suggested to correspond to. But, here, in contrast to when a managerial metaphor makes-sense, the symbolic content of the source domain is poor (cf. ‘symbolic anorexia’, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).
- Pseudo-sense (decoupled/rich). If a managerial metaphor makes pseudo-sense, it is perceived to be decoupled from the lived experience it is suggested to correspond to (cf. ‘emptiness’, Alvesson, 2013a). But the symbolism of the source domain is rich.
- Non-sense (decoupled/poor). If a managerial metaphor makes non-sense, it is perceived to be decoupled from the lived experience it is suggested to correspond to. But, here, in contrast to when a managerial metaphor makes pseudo-sense, the symbolic content of the source domain is poor (cf. ‘non-sense’, Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

6. Conclusion

This sixth chapter of conclusion is organized into three subchapters. Firstly, we answer our main research question by presenting the key findings along the levels of text, meaning, and practice (as discussed in the previous chapter). Secondly, in light of our main findings, we outline the theoretical, empirical and practical contributions of the study. Thirdly, and lastly, we reflect on the limitations of our study and suggest some avenues for further research.

6.1 Metaphors on the level of text, meaning and practice

In this study, we have explored symbolic management attempts of change in an organization. Specifically, we explored metaphors in use in the symbolic management of strategic change along three hierarchical levels – top management, middle management, and co-workers – in Swedbank from a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Here, the principal metaphors in use in the discourse of strategic change were journeys and boats. Top management was understood as the senders of the sensegiving attempts, middle management as both the senders and receivers, and the co-workers were the end receivers.

The overall research purpose of accompanying Swedbank on its journey of (strategic) change towards its Wanted Position was to develop a better understanding of the discursive,

cognitive and emotional experience of symbolic management attempts of strategic change and its translation into the (imperfect) organizational practice from both a managerial and a non-managerial perspective. Thus, we set out to explore and develop a better understanding of symbolic management attempts, and/or managerial metaphors, on three interrelated levels of analysis: the level of text, the level of meaning (and emotions), and the level of practice.

To realize this purpose, we set out to answer the (main) research question as follows:

- How do managers and non-managers construct, make sense of and enact managerial metaphors in the symbolic management of change?

To answer this main research question, we posed three research subquestions that guided us throughout our endeavour – questions which structured the conversation and were elaborated on the previous chapter of discussion. Now, to answer our main research question in this last chapter of conclusion, we present our key findings along each level of analysis.

Firstly, on the level of text (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a), the first question that we set out to answer was: How are the managerial metaphors theorized in the discourse of change? In light of our previous discussion in section 5.1.2, the short answer to this research (sub)question is that although our informants used similar vocabularies in the discourse of change, the managerial metaphors were constructed differently along different hierarchical levels of the organization. Both in terms of metaphorical elements highlighted and/or added in the images (cf. Oswick & Grant, 1996b) and, in particular, the second-level metaphors in play (cf. Alvesson, 1993b). Specifically, in brief, we proposed the following:

- Our informants theorized a dramatic landscape when exploring – and/or extending (cf. Cornelissen et al. 2008) – the managerial boat journey metaphor in discourse (p.117).
- Here, while the discourse, in general, was packed with managerial symbolism, we argued that both Swedbank’s Wanted Position and the life on the boat suffered from ‘symbolic anorexia’ (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).
- The guiding image of (strategic) change differed along different hierarchical levels of the organization. Here, we suggested that the top management’s guiding image was to ‘maintain its position’, while middle management’s guiding image was ‘survival’ (cf. Morgan, 2001) and the co-workers guiding image was ‘the last journey with the crew’.
- In light of this, we argued that the narratives told by top management could be located in the destination-oriented journey, while the narratives told by middle management could be located in the process-oriented journey (cf. Marshak, 1993b).
- However, following Sonenshein (2010), we suggested that the latter category may be divided into two types: an ‘exploration-oriented journey’ (i.e. progressive narrative) or an ‘exploitation-oriented journey’ (i.e. regressive narrative).

In other words, firstly, the change recipients embellished the top managerial journey metaphor by constructing it as a process (i.e. ‘ongoing accomplishment’, Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) rather than as a (grand) plan (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Secondly, among the two groups of change recipients, the narratives differed along the dimension of dressing the change in a positive vocabulary (i.e. progressive narrative) or a negative vocabulary (i.e. regressive narrative). In light of these findings, we suggested that three different journeys were constructed in the discourse of (strategic) change along different hierarchical levels of the organization: a destination-oriented journey (top management), an exploration-oriented journey (middle management), and an exploitation-oriented journey (co-workers).

Furthermore, following Marshak (1993a), we argued that there was a ‘misalignment’ between the intended type of change and the managerial metaphors. A misalignment which, in addition, was (re)produced in everyday discursive practices in the organization (at least in interview situations). Here, we argued that Swedbank had embarked on a transformational change, a paradigm shift (Swedbank, 2016, p.12), but the change was metaphorically dressed in the (‘conflicting’) vocabulary of a transitional change (cf. Palmer & Dunford, 1996).

Despite acknowledging that clarity in communication in (strategic) change work not necessarily is a virtue (cf. Eisenberg, 1984; Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012), we argued that it could have been more meaningful to use another metaphor that was grounded in the intended type of change (cf. Marshak, 1993a) and that, in addition, embodied more creative potential (cf. Morgan, 1993). Therefore, as an alternative to the boar journey metaphor, we suggested a space journey metaphor – moving from one planet to another in (cyber)space (p.119).

Secondly, on the level of meaning (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a) and emotions, the second question that we set out to answer was: How are the managerial metaphors made sense of? In light of our previous discussion in section 5.1.3, the short answer to this research (sub)question is, alike the (short) answer to the first research subquestion, that the managerial metaphors – the journey and the boat – were made sense of in different ways along different hierarchical levels of the organization. Thus, the managerial metaphors did not only differ in discourse, but in cognitions (Alvesson, 1993a) and emotions (Smollan, 2014) as well.

Further, as we assumed a tight – as opposed to a loose – coupling between meaning and discourse (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a), we have already, when answering the first subquestion above, touched upon the level of meaning (and emotions). This as discourse was

understood to word the (organizational) world and the self in particular ways and, thus, to constitute, or frame, particular ways of thinking, acting and being (cf. Fairclough, 1995).

Specifically, in brief, we proposed the following:

- The receivers of the top managerial sensegiving attempts did not necessarily make the same sense of the sensegiving attempts as the senders (cf. Corvellec & Risberg, 2007).
- Firstly, both in relation to the journey metaphor and the boat metaphor, we argued that the middle managers' meanings and emotions were aligned with the intentions of top management (cf. 'change recipient sensemaking', Balogun & Johnson, 2005).
- Secondly, in contrast, both in relation to the journey metaphor and the boat metaphor, we argued that the (managerial) picture became more fragmented, and/or colourful, when including the voices of the co-workers, the receiving end (Bartunek et al. 2006). Here, echoing the findings of Huzzard, Hellström and Lifvergren (2014), we argued that some co-workers were cognitively and emotionally aligned with the intentions of top management, some were ambivalent, and some were indifferent and/or sceptical.
- In addition, we argued that the cognitive and emotional dimensions of metaphors may, from an individual perspective, sometimes be in 'conflict' (p.127).

Here, to make plausible sense of the different sense made among the recipients of the top managerial sensegiving attempts, we drew, among other things, theoretical inspiration from sensemaking (cf. Weick, 1995). In brief, we suggested that the difference in the sense made among the recipient may be (better) understood in light of that:

- The top managerial story, or narrative, of change (or journey) was perceived to lack plausibility among some of the recipients, both in terms of the speed of change and/or the (positive) relationship between customer satisfaction and digitization.
- Here, we suggested four different clues that may hold some explanatory potential: (1) The recipients of change extracted cues (or the lack thereof) from the ongoing flow of the Swedbank experience that did not fit into or contradicted the corporate-sponsored storyline, (2) That cues were not seen and thereby not extracted as the recipients did not know what to look for in the situation in which they found themselves (and, thus, the story, or metaphor, could not bridge the cue and the frame), (3) That the recipients only were told a partial version of the story and, thus, the cue (the part) and the frame (the whole), and vice versa, were perceived as non-sensible, (4) That the recipients were indifferent and/or sceptical to the storyline in light of their past experiences of ('substantive') change and/or the managerial talk of it (cf. 'default response', Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017; 'stability narrative', Sonenshein, 2010).

However, following Bartunek et al. (2006) and scholarly others (e.g. Cornelissen, Holt & Zundel, 2011), we theorized that the cognitive and emotional variation in the sensemaking of the recipients of the top managerial sensegiving attempts could perhaps most plausibly be understood on the backdrop of a variation in perceived personal impact, or self-interest, of

the (espoused) outcomes of change. Both in terms of (work) identity and material factors (cf. Weick, 1995). As managers and non-managers held different formal positions and, thus, had different duties, tasks and responsibilities, they may be argued to have been affected by the change in different ways which may shed light of why they, on a group level, made different sense of it – as a positive, explorative journey, or as a negative, exploitative journey.

In turn, following Riad (2011), we argued that the cognitive and emotional variation in the recipients' sensemaking of top managerial metaphors may, among other things, be understood on the backdrop of the trajectory of the narrative in which it is put (progressive, regressive, or stability, Sonenshein, 2010). Or, in the words of Weick (1995), the cue may mean different things as it is put in different frames (in which a narrative, or metaphor, may function as a 'cognitive bridge', e.g. Dunford & Jones, 2000; Lakoff, 1993).

Thirdly, on the level of practice (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a), the third question that we set out to answer was: How are the managerial metaphors enacted in practice? In light of our previous discussion in section 5.1.4, the short answer to this research subquestion is, alike the (short) answers to the other research subquestions, that the managerial metaphors were enacted differently along different hierarchical levels of the organization.

In particular, if understanding the managerial metaphors in the context in which they were said to come about (and correspond to), the imperfect life in organizations, we argued that it was evident that the managerial giving of sense to organizational others was neither without its problems, pitfalls nor limitations. As it involved, among other things, an active audience (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007) and organizational constraints (Balogun, 2003).

Specifically, in brief, from a middle managerial perspective, we argued that:

- In the discourse of change, four middle managerial roles (cf. 'change intermediary', Balogun, 2003) 'emerged' in our empirical material that we, by playing with the boat metaphors, argued could be understood metaphorically as 'pointing the way forward' (i.e. talk about strategies, goals and/or change), 'rowing' (i.e. role modeling), 'going down on deck' (i.e. culture bearer), and 'keeping the boat afloat' (i.e. management).
- The first role, 'pointing the way forward', was understood as the role among the four that, most explicitly, embodied notions of the 'management of meaning' (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Here, in the context of strategic change work, a key middle managerial task was said to be to answer the 'why-question' – to provide a powerful rationale for why to legitimize and/or rationalize the top managerial strategies, goals and agenda in the head (and hearts) of organizational others (and self) (cf. Pfeffer, 1981).

- However, from a symbolic management perspective (cf. Siehl & Martin, 1984), we argued that the middle managers struggled with the ‘why-question’. A struggle that we referred to as a ‘managerial dilemma’ (cf. Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).
- To ‘solve’ this managerial dilemma, we argued that the middle managerial discursive strategies used could be sorted under two subcategories: non-symbolic or symbolic. If using the non-symbolic discursive strategy, the managers used their legitimate power to ‘push’ the initiative through. And if using the latter strategy, the middle managers embarked on the (symbolic) management of meaning in acts of communication.
- When the middle managers used symbolic discursive strategies (e.g. ‘sensegiving’, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), we argued that it could be divided into two types: positive framing and negative framing (cf. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Here, we argued that the managers were preoccupied with using a negative frame (e.g. threats) rather than using a positive frame (e.g. opportunities) – struggling to fill the ‘meaning void’ from their sensebreaking attempts with new, positive meaning (cf. Pratt, 2000).
- When the middle managers used a negative frame, we argued that they drew on three different discourses which we labelled: the Bank, the Shipwreck, and the Myth.

An elaboration on managerial metaphors and the symbolic management of (strategic) change which we connected to the first illustrative example, ‘The Breakdown’, in which we illustrated how a top managerial attempt to manage the sensemaking of organizational others led to an even larger gap in meanings, emotions and understandings on the issue between the top management, the middle management and the co-workers. An illustration that, along with other observations and reflections, we argued, problematized the concept of sensegiving (and the management of meaning in general) and raised questions such as: It is possible for managers to, in an instrumental fashion, manage the sensemaking of others to, in turn, create systems of shared vocabularies, meanings and understandings (cf. Smircich, 1983a)?

Furthermore, in light of that, on the one hand, different interpretations of what is and what ought to be (and what have been) was the *modus operandi* in the discourse of change and, on the other hand, the local organization was reported to perform *par excellence*, we questioned not only the possibility for, but also the instrumental value of, shared meanings, emotions and understandings in change work in the organization in general and, in particular, between different hierarchical levels of the organization? Or, put differently, we argued that our findings indicated that behavioral compliance to the corporate agenda among recipients of change is not necessarily an outcome of shared meanings, emotions and understandings.

In addition, if we for analytical purposes assumed conditions of ideal speech and that sharedness in meanings, emotions and understandings is arrived at, if put in its sociomaterial context (cf. Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), we firstly questioned whether it is always possible,

or ethical, to act on such understanding? Further, to make a connection to the third illustrative example, ‘The Boat Journey’, we asked ourselves, what about the imperfections in the life of organizations? Are the ambiguities, complexities, uncertainties and bounded cognitivites, among other things, not part of the (business) human condition? Here, a limit of symbolic management in general and, perhaps, managerial metaphor in particular, was argued to be that some constraints and material realities cannot simply be talked into (or out of) existence.

When addressing the social dimension of sensemaking and sensegiving practices in the organization (cf. Weick, 1995), in brief, we argued that:

- From a middle managerial perspective, top-down strategic initiatives were made sense of along both vertical and horizontal levels of the organization. In terms of the former, we argued that it may be understood as ‘the cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving’ (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) or ‘organizational sensemaking’ (Maitlis, 2005). And the latter may be understood as ‘inter-recipient sensemaking’ (Balogun & Johnson, 2005).
- From a co-worker perspective, top-down strategic initiatives were, alike the middle managers, made sense of along both vertical and horizontal levels of the organization. Particularly, as we showed in the second illustrative examples, ‘The Retrospection’, the co-workers made retrospective (social) sense of events in the absence of managers.

Thus, while acknowledging that some powerful groups in the organization may hold an unequally strong position to influence the social construction of social reality (cf. Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), we suggested that it is, at least to some extent, a co-construction. In other words, when managerial sense is given, the co-workers are not simply taken it – but it is (re)interpreted, negotiated in (social) interaction and, perhaps, narrated sometimes as championed, sometimes as accepted, and sometimes as resisted (cf. Sonenshein, 2010). In turn, if uncoupling the common a priori coupling of ‘the intention, the act and the outcome’ (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017, p.149), its enactment in practice and its outcomes on, for example, change work, is an empirical question. In this study, while the symbolism embedded in the managerial metaphors ‘took a life of its own’ on all levels of analysis, the corporate apparatus of Swedbank still seemed to have (hot) steam in its boilers.

6.2 Theoretical, empirical and practical contributions

In light of the key findings as presented in the previous subchapter when answering our main research question, we now outline the theoretical, empirical and practical contributions of the study. Theoretically, our aim was to problematize some of the prevailing assumptions

underpinning the existing body of knowledge regarding the use (and misuse) of metaphors as a sensemaking and sensegiving device in the symbolic management of strategic change. Through adopting an ambiguity-centred approach to organizations (cf. Martin & Meyerson, 1988) and including the voices of the frequently ignored receiving end (cf. Bartunek et al. 2006), we explored managerial metaphors and pointed at, among other things, its variations in discourse, divergences in meanings, differences in emotional response, and its problems, pitfalls and limitations in its (social) enactment in the (imperfect) organizational practice.

Accordingly, guided by a reflexive approach to social scientific research, we attempted to demystify and denaturalizing taken-for-granted, common(non)sensical assumptions and constructs, along with surfacing alternative interpretations and voices (cf. Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017). This led us to not only object to the dominant sender-centric view of sense in the literature (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007), but also to raise questions about the possibility to manage the sensemaking of others, the instrumental value of shared meanings, emotions and understandings between different hierarchical levels of the organization in change work, and if it always is possible to act on such sharedness? In addition, our findings indicated that managerial metaphor in change work is as much an emotional as a cognitive endeavour.

Empirically, our aim was to offer thick descriptions of managers' and non-managers' experiences of a challenging and symbolically-laden strategic change process in the making. By conducting an explorative ethnographically-inspired, longitudinal qualitative case study, in which we used multiple research methods (i.e. interviews, participant observations and document studies to construct empirical material and a dual insider-outsider approach, we used metaphors both as a vehicle to explore, unpack and develop a better understanding of social phenomena and as an empirical phenomenon in itself (cf. Cornelissen et al. 2008).

To our knowledge, this study is one of few studies on managerial metaphors of change (and, on symbolic management in organizations in general) that both work on three different levels of analysis – text, meaning (and emotions), and practice (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a) – and having a threefold empirical focus on sensemaking and sensegiving practices: top management, middle management, and co-workers (three different hierarchical levels).

In addition, we did not only include the receiving end into the change conversation (cf. Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) but, following Smollan (2014, p.795), the emotional dimension of metaphors as well, which is 'frequently overlooked' in the literature. Furthermore, in light of our reflexive approach to research and our aim to offer

thick descriptions, we explored and made sense of sensemaking and sensegiving practices in general, and managerial metaphors in the symbolic management of change in particular, in its (messy) discursive, social, cultural, political and economic context (cf. Denzin, 1992).

Practically, on the backdrop of the theoretical contributions and empirical findings, our aim was to pave the way for a reflexive approach to metaphor in strategic change work in organizations. Here, while Palmer and Dunford (1996) called for researchers to adopt a reflexive approach to studying organizational metaphors, we suggest that our findings may open up for a more reflective and, in particular, dialogic approach to metaphors in change work (cf. ‘the turn to dialogue’, Marshak & Grant, 2008).

For example, in the chapter of discussion, we provided a number of questions aiming at facilitating reflexivity in ‘metaphor work’ (pp.140-141) and a heuristic to ‘reality test’ managerial metaphors (p.142). However, we do acknowledge that a reflexive approach to metaphor in (strategic) change work is neither without its problems nor ironies. For example, if a managerial metaphor is perceived by a co-worker to be of limited help as it feels as if s/he is drowning, would the problem be solved by aligning symbolic realities? Or by bringing about the (material) conditions and emotional support for the co-worker to do his/her job?

6.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

In this last subchapter in this paper, we reflect on the limitations of our study and suggest some avenues for further research. As signaled in the previous chapter of methodology and method, in light of the research paradigm in which our study is grounded and our choice of research design, our research aim was to craft heuristics for thinking to be generalized into theory (as opposed to empiri) and to pose questions to facilitate a more reflexive approach to metaphor in change work. However, as noted in our empirical section, not only Swedbank had embarked on a digitization journey, but many other large banks in Sweden as well. And, in general, as metaphors such as journeys and boats seem to be an omnipresent feature of the vocabularies and the social fabric in the wider cultural community in which our informants and ourselves are part, the findings may be meaningful beyond the banking industry as well.

Regarding suggestions for further research, we find it to be of interest to explore and develop a better understanding of how a more reflexive and dialogic approach to metaphor in change work would play out in practice? How would both managers and non-managers make sense of it? Do managerial metaphor matter (beyond grandiosity)? If yes, in what way?

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