



**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
School of Economics and Management

## Blending the Client

Working with an Image to Facilitate Sustainable Change

BUSN49: Degree Project

**MSc Managing People, Knowledge and Change**

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## **Abstract**

- Titel:** Blending the Client: Working with an Image to Facilitate Sustainable Change
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- Course:** BUSN49 - Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge and Change Master Level
- Authors:** Antonia Ruppe, Luisa Schunk
- Advisor:** Stefan Sveningsson
- Thesis Purpose:** With an interpretative perspective, the main purpose of this study is to understand how a contradiction between the image and the organisational identity can facilitate a sustainable change
- Methodology:** The research is of qualitative nature and conducted from an interpretative perspective
- Theoretical Perspective:** Dominant literature argues that consultancies create an image that is based on their organisational identity and thus align both with a rather tool-based perspective on change. With the proposition of an alternative perspective, namely a contradiction between a technical image and an organisational identity based on a processual and critical perspective on change, we contribute and challenge existing theory.
- Empirical Foundation:** The case of a Danish consultancy builds the foundation for this study. Semi-structured interviews conducted with consultants from different levels represent our main empirical material.
- Conclusion:** Based on our main findings we developed an empirical paradox that illustrates the paradox of facilitating successful change in spite of an approach to change that contradicts market expectations. Further, a conceptual paradox shall challenge existing theory on the connection between image and organisational identity.
- Keywords:** Consultancies, Image, Identity, Managing Organisational Change, Organisational Culture

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
KIF(s)	Knowledge intensive firm(s)
PSF(s)	Professional service firm(s)
OD	Organisational Development
R&D	Research & Development
i.e.	Id est; that is to say

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

In today's fast-changing economy, one can barely find organisations that do not seek support from consultancies during change programmes (Lixenfeld, 2012). Many of the big consultancies develop their own planned change models with which they present themselves as experts and create an image for the external world to distinguish themselves (Alvesson, 2004). Consequently, their approach to change can be described as toolbox oriented and mostly results in the implementation of a standardised process (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). This standardised process often resembles a toolbox orientation and sometimes might even contain process elements but is mostly based on a universal template on how to conduct problem identification and problem-solving. Based on that, consultants use standard templates they have received much criticism for not recognising local peculiarities and idiosyncrasies. Some of the criticism is targeting the consultant's inability to know the particular context they are working in, sufficiently (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Organisational concrete realities and context are often treated rather shallow and insufficiently when it comes to culture, for example. Alvesson (2004), for example, suggests that consultancies are merely good at developing fancy looking PowerPoint presentations but are not able to facilitate sustainable change. Thus, he concludes that the main activity of knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs), which a consultancy is, is to create an image of themselves that impresses their clients and hides the fact that they do not accomplish real and substantial results when it comes to developing organisations (Alvesson, 2004). Of course, they occasionally have recipes for downsizing with real outcomes, but the development aspect seems more elusive (Alvesson, 2004).

Creating an image is essential for KIFs due to the fact that they do not sell a tangible product but their knowledge and expertise, which in turn is the expectation of the market (Empson, 2004). Thus, considering that the market expects expert knowledge and change models that promise success, the image that consultancies create is much around rather functionalistic and technical approaches to change projects in the way they communicate and portray their services (Alvesson, 2001). However, there exist numerous negative case studies, where change programmes failed due to neglecting organisational culture and context as well as failing to

convince and engage employees (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Many of the existing writings consider organisational culture as a crucial and essential element that needs to be considered in order to manage a change project successfully. In fact, existing literature indicates that most change projects do not end up with the desired outcome, because organisational culture is ignored as an essential aspect for the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Consequently, one can argue that the image that consultancies create of themselves and draw upon may be appealing and look good but lacks the components that help organisations to implement sustainable organisational change (Alvesson, 2001).

Empson (2004) argues that the image such professional service firms (PSFs) create is primarily based on their organisational identity as organisational members convey a positive image to external parties in order to convince clients of their service excellence. Walsh (2001) states that most management consultancies tend to adopt technical methods and predefined processes in order to manage change in client organisations. This insufficient understanding of organisational change and the resulting actions to perform change initiatives are highly influenced by their organisational identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Thus, in line with Empson (2004), one can argue for an alignment between the image created and their organisational identity as both call for rather technical perspectives on change. As a result, most consultancies fail to recognise the complexity that comes with organisational change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016).

## **1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions**

We believe that our study is interesting because we found a consultancy that acknowledges the relevance and meaningfulness of culture and context in change processes in a more sophisticated manner. Despite that, our case company finds itself in the same industry as other consultancies meaning that market demands and expectations are as well shaped by a rather technical understanding of change and culture, thus calling for instrumental methods and toolboxes for change. Following that, they create an image that is somewhat detached and decoupled from their perspective on organisational change in order to meet these market expectations. Their internal perspective on change, however, influences their organisational identity to a large extent. As a result, we found a misalignment between the image they create; being technical experts, and their internal organisational identity. The latter suggests they have



a much more sophisticated understanding of organisational change and the relevance of culture. To analyse this possible misalignment of our case company and point out its particularities is of high interest for both scholars and practitioners since literature normally assumes an alignment between image and identity concerning consultancies offering a service around organisational change (Alvesson, 2004; Empson, 2004). Therefore, we would like to investigate *how Nordics Consulting creates an image of themselves – as focused on the technical toolbox – for the purpose to accomplish real and sustained organisational change – in accordance with a more processual and critical approach.*

With the following guiding questions, we would like to investigate on this problem:

- *What are the characteristics of their organisational identity and how does it contrast to – or even contradict - their image?*
- *How do they facilitate sustainable change despite this contrast?*
- *What challenges emerge as a result of the potential misalignment between the organisational identity and expressed image?*

Our purpose with this study is to understand how a contrast between the image and the organisational identity of a consultancy can facilitate a sustainable change and from that to illustrate implications that follow for theory.

## 1.3 Thesis Outline



*Figure 1: Thesis Outline*

## 2. Literature Review

In this chapter, we set a theoretical stage for our thesis. As our study revolves around the image and identity of a consultancy, providing a service in the area of organisational change, we introduce concepts of organisational change, image, identity and organisational culture. Lastly, we elaborate on challenges which emerge from a misalignment between image and identity in connection to consulting change projects.

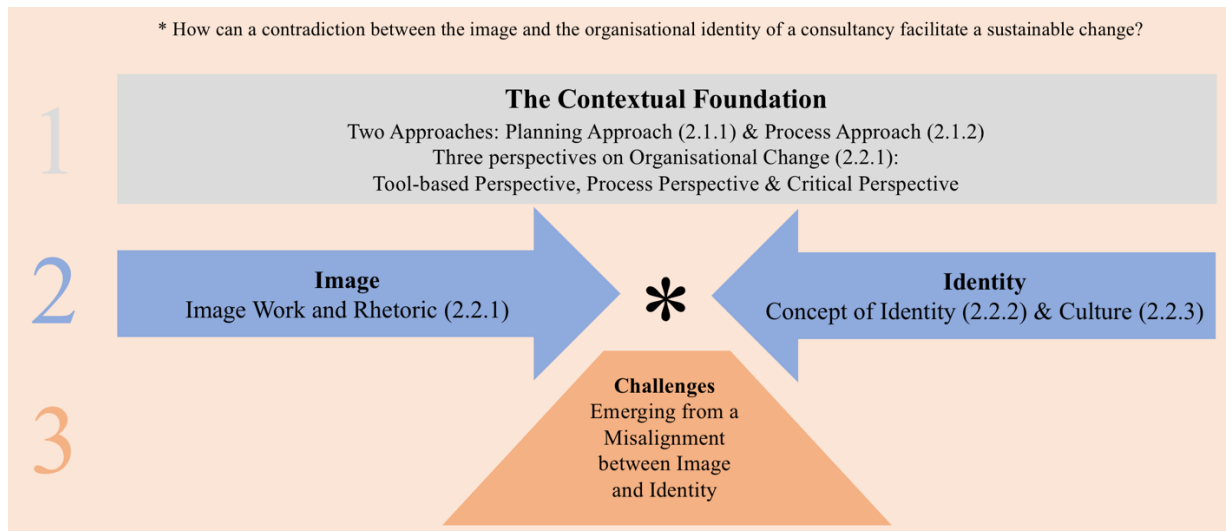


Figure 2: Contextualisation of Literature

### The context of consultancy work

Due to the fact that consultancies provide a service to client firms that is based on their knowledge and expertise in a specific area they are KIFs which can be divided into two categories, namely PSFs and R&D firms. While the latter refers to organisations operating in the area of natural science and is not of particular interest for our study, the former refers to organisations such as consultancy firms or law firms that offer a service and their expert knowledge at the market (Alvesson, 2004). Professional service firms are characterised by the fact that their employees stand in personal and close contact with their clients to be able to develop a customised product (Alvesson, 2004). Alvesson (2004) points out some characteristics of KIFs, such as the asymmetry of power and information between the client and the professional. In that relationship, the PSF is often perceived as having more expert knowledge and thus more power at hand compared to the client who lacks experience in that particular area. Another characteristic is that, due to the intangibility of their service, quality assessment is often complicated and very subjective (Alvesson, 2004). These characteristics

are, to a great extent, applicable to management consultancies due to the type of work and knowledge they provide.

## **2.1 Organisational Change**

Even though we are not studying organisational change per se, we think it is important to introduce the concept of organisational change to the reader, as this represents the service that Nordics Consulting is providing its clients with. Hence, we start by introducing the topic of organisational change more in general, which is followed by three perspectives to look upon organisational change.

In today's fast-changing economy, organisations are forced to adapt continuously in order to accomplish a competitive advantage (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). For this reason, organisational change initiatives are becoming increasingly essential. However, it is not surprising that a majority of change projects fail due to the complexity and challenging notion of change projects (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Consequently, the research field of organisational change remains interesting to study, not least because today's society is driven by organisational success (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019).

Reasons for organisational change are manifold and can be influenced by both internal and external factors (Child, 2005). Concerning external factors for organisational change, the literature mentions technological, political, cultural but also demographic market changes, whereby reduced performance, staff turnover but also a newly assigned management team can lead to internal pressure for organisational change (Child, 2005; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016).

The literature presents two different approaches to organisational change, namely the planned and the process approach (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). While the planned approach to organisational change refers to models and predefined steps to accomplish change, the process approach defines change as unpredictable and continuous, occurring on a daily basis (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). Due to the fact that our case company

provides a service, namely organisational change, we further elaborate on the two approaches to change in order to secure a profound understanding of organisational change.

### **2.1.1 Planning Approach to Organisational Change**

The general assumption literature has of most practitioners is that they have a rather functionalistic view on organisational change and thus adopt the planning approach which assumes that change can be achieved through predefined successive steps (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Literature presents various models such as Kurt Lewin's ice-cube model, in which he depicts a change process using stages- *unfreeze, change, refreeze* (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). In these different phases of the change process, different managerial tasks are assigned to the change agents, and thus also to consultants who by the nature of their work, represent change agents (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Kotter's (1996) eight step-model to change complements Lewin's ice-cube model to change by introducing more detailed steps to accomplish change. In other words, the planned change approach suggests that the change process, as well as its outcomes, can be controlled (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Therefore, consultants often are perceived as having an essential role since they represent a main character in planning and implementing the change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016).

Even though such planned approaches to change are most dominant among practitioners, they are often in critique of more critical scholars. Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2019) argue that most change models like Kotter's and Lewin's model neglect the individuality and uniqueness of organisations that lead to contextual circumstances in organisational reality. In line with that, Balogun and Johnson (2005) argue that change is more likely to fail if organisational culture is left unconsidered. These contextual and cultural issues can severely complicate a simple implementation of several steps if they are being ignored (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). As an alternative, scholars refer to the processual approach to change, which acknowledges the relevance of context and culture in a more sophisticated manner (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019).

### **2.1.2 Process Approach to Organisational Change**

As stated earlier, the process approach characterises organisational change as unpredictable and continuous, occurring on a daily basis (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). In line with that, Palmer, Dunford, and Buchanan (2016) state that the processual perspective on change is characterised by the fact that it assumes change not to have a clearly defined beginning and end point. One main difference to planned change models is that the process approach considers and reflects not only upon the present situation but also upon the past and future context (Dawson, 2003). According to Pettigrew (1985), process perspectives further consider organisational context and complexity regarding organisational change. In line with this are Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) who state that the process approach concerns itself more with individual interpretations and understandings that organisational actors have of change as these significantly influence their behaviour and actions.

The notion of a process approach to change can thus be connected to the concept of dialogic organisational development (OD) (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Scholars of dialogic OD view reality as subjective. In other words, reality is about the subjective interpretations as knowledge is considered as subjective rather than believing in an objective truth (Prasad, 2017). Based on this assumption, it is essential to understand that change can only be achieved by influencing mindsets of organisational actors and reinterpreting meanings (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). This can be accomplished through altering conversations and dialogues and thereby presenting new possibilities (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). It is thus important to understand and consider the values, beliefs, and experiences of each individual affected by the change process argue the researchers. In this approach, the consultant becomes involved in the organisation and facilitates conversations and dialogues rather than representing only a neutral external expert (Marshak, 2013). How consultants can enable such conversations and dialogues, we outline in the next section.

In order to facilitate conversations and dialogues, which build a basis for organisational change consultancies work with specific methods. Methods proposed by researchers are the appreciative inquiry and the concept of sense-making.

### The method of appreciative inquiry

A method proposed by researchers to accomplish change is the appreciative inquiry (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). The appreciative inquiry breaks with more traditional, diagnosis-driven organisational development theories which are mainly focused on solving problems and conflicts (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Instead, it opens up a new perspective on change that emphasises a concentration on the positive and an envisioning of the future (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Such inclusionary methods transformed the organisation of group interventions and researchers referred to them as a “new type of social innovation” (Bunker & Alban, 1992, p. 473) or a “paradigm shift” (Dannemiller & Jacobs, 1992, p. 497). There exist four elements to the appreciative inquiry; *discovery*, *building*, *designing*, and *sustaining* (Fuller, Griffin & Ludema, 2000). Discovery aims at finding out what is currently going best in terms of practices which is also referred to as appreciating. By building on that knowledge, organisational actors can jointly envision and formalise an aspired future (Fuller, Griffin & Ludema, 2000). During the design phase, organisational members construct the future they want to achieve through collective dialogue (Fuller, Griffin & Ludema, 2000). Ultimately, the organisation’s future is sustained (Fuller, Griffin & Ludema, 2000). During these stages, organisational actors ask each other a set of questions that ought to help them define their desired future and necessary steps towards it (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). The appreciative inquiry can be subordinated to the positive organisational scholarship which is a “new movement in organisational science” (p. 293) focusing on positive psychology and eliminating negative notions connected to organisational change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Although it is divided into four successive phases, the appreciative inquiry otherwise has a very dialogic approach to change as it mainly uses conversation, dialogue and participation to work towards the organisational goal. It is thus still proposed by scholars representing a processual or dialogic perspective on change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016).

### The concept of sense-making

The concept of sense-making supports and establishes an understanding of a change for organisational members (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013). Here, managers or change agents have the key task to communicate “a sense of ‘what’s going on.’” (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016, p. 298) to employees. Mantere, Schildt and Sillince (2012) outlined a more detailed description of the sense-making process. It starts with a sequence of sense-breaking, which means that leaders question the current status of the organisation. Following, leaders

engage in sense-giving, which aims at reshaping the understanding of people and providing them with a new direction to orientate oneself to (Mantere, Schildt & Sillince, 2012). Organisational change can be difficult for employees since it alters people's guiding principles that used to provide them with a frame of reference (Lockett, Currie, Finn, Martin & Waring 2014). Sense-making can thus provide guidance and security throughout the change process (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Moreover, addressing individual and team identities in cultural changes can help employees to understand new behavioural guidelines, norms, and responsibilities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). A change process in general from this perspective goes beyond a narrow perspective on change and explicitly deals with the meaning and identity of the individuals involved in the change process (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016).

Our study does not primarily focus on how to approach organisational change, rather on Nordics consultant's image and identity, which is highly influenced by their perspective on change. Therefore, we elaborate on perspectives on change in the next section.

### **2.1.3 Perspectives on Organisational Change**

Sveningsson and Sörgärde (2019) present three perspectives on organisational change, namely, tool-based, process and critical perspective, which are intended to extend the existing literature on the topic of change by a pedagogical component. To make it more transparent, they raise questions like “How are we supposed to make change happen?”, “What is happening in change processes?” and “Why work with change?” (p.13) in order to “pedagogically frame the large field of writings” (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019, p.14). Considering we are studying organisational identity and image work in a consultancy firm; we argue it is crucial to consider the perspectives on change as each conveys different values and assumptions around the service our case company provides – organisational change. In the following, we explain the three perspectives.

#### **Tool-based Perspective on Change**

The first perspective is called the tool perspective as the focus here mainly lies on how to realise a certain change object and is therefore often adopted by practitioners (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). It is thus a rather technical, instrumental perspective on change that assumes it can be planned and managed with the help of change models and toolboxes (Sveningsson &



Sörgärde, 2019). The tool perspective is based on a technical knowledge interest, which means that it aims at developing knowledge on the management and regulation of social processes, such as organisational change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). It thus is ultimately interested in achieving higher productivity and efficiency by applying knowledge gained to the development of new technologies and applications (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019).

### Process Perspective on Change

The process perspective presents a different view on organisational change, as described by Sveningsson and Sörgärde (2019). While the tool perspective rests on a technical knowledge interest, the process perspective draws upon an interpretative knowledge interest (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). In other words, the process perspective emphasises the importance to develop an understanding of the complexity of change processes and for what actually is happening in organisational reality (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). It attaches much relevance to the creation of meaning and therefore, draws upon the concepts of language and culture (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). In other words, knowledge is not associated with methods or models for achieving organisational change such as the tool perspective but instead focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of social processes that are characterised by complexity and uncertainty (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019).

### The critical perspective on change

Even though the process perspective on change considers the relevance of culture and context, Sveningsson and Sörgärde (2019) take it a step further and criticise that change is mostly viewed as inevitable and obligatory, which in reality is not always the case. It is thus primarily based on the research orientation of *Critical Management Studies*, which combines critical theory with post-structuralist writings (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). The critical perspective challenges traditional change management theories that are mostly taken for granted and thus reproduce assumptions instead of reflecting about them. This is in line with its emancipatory knowledge interest focusing on critical reflection (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). This notion can be related to the concept of functional stupidity by Alvesson and Spicer (2016), which refers to the tendency of organisational actors to not think critically and question the meaningfulness of their work activities. Instead of asking for justification of specific work procedures and initiatives, they take these for granted (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). The critical perspective on change, therefore, argues that one should focus on power relations and politics

when talking about change as this enables understanding some of the interests and motives of individuals associated with the change processes (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019).

Having described the three main perspectives on organisational change, we now elaborate on the concepts of image, identity, and culture. These concepts are of relevance for consultancy work because they are significantly influenced by the perspective that the consultancy adopts for their approach to managing change.

## 2.2 Image, Identity and Culture

As described earlier, the market consultancies find themselves in call for smart solutions and processes for change that seem to certify expert knowledge of those offering them. In addition to that, most consultancies actually believe in the generalisability of their technical and instrumental models, thereby neglecting important issues such as organisational culture and context (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). As a result, the image they create for themselves revolves a lot around the tool-based perspective on change, as does their organisational identity (Alvesson, 2004). In the following section, we thus elaborate on the theoretical concepts of image, identity and culture as the three are interrelated, as shown in Figure 3:

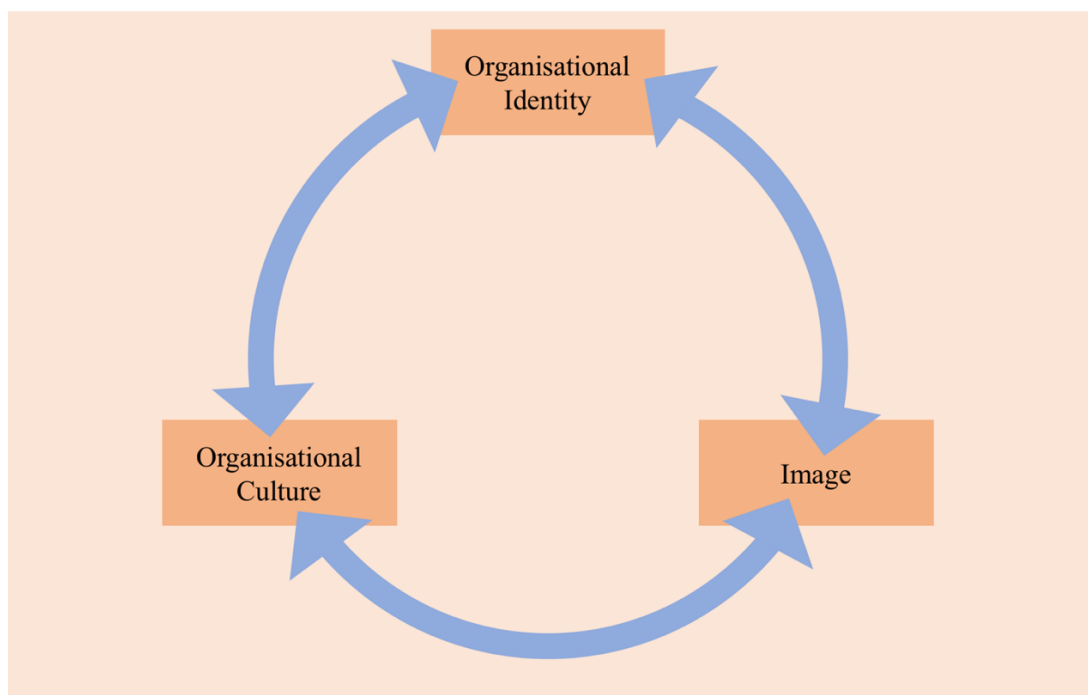


Figure 3: Interrelation between Organisational identity, image, and organisational culture

Empson (2004) argues that the image of an organisation is largely based on its organisational identity. In line with this, Alvesson (2004) states that the way organisational members behave and communicate to the external audience, which is influenced by their organisational identity, affects the image of the organisation. Additionally, the image that an external audience has of an organisation can, in turn, influence organisational identity, for example, based on status and reputation (Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002). Hatch and Schultz (2003) describe the relation between image and organisational culture as interrelated since an “alignment between [...] image and actual organisational culture magnifies awareness among all stakeholders about who the corporation is and what it stands for, and enhances organisational attractiveness and reputation” (p. 1049). Organisational culture and identity are related in the way that values, beliefs, and assumptions that are anchored in culture help organisational members to distinguish themselves from other organisations and thus provide an answer to the identity question (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Consequently, the three concepts are mutually reinforcing.

### **2.2.1 Image Work and Rhetoric**

As consultancies operate in a knowledge-intensive context, where they deliver a service which is rather invisible due to the nature of knowledge, concepts such as an organisational image become increasingly important in order to present their work positively and establish themselves on the market (Alvesson, 2004). According to Alvesson (2004), the concept of image is used in order to facilitate own interests, which means that it is of subjective truth and does not have to rely on actual experiences (Langer, 1993). Hence, an image is transferred by expressing or trying to project a certain impression from a sender to a receiver, which implies a specific interest (Alvesson, 2004). Boorstin (1992) explains “An image is ambiguous. It floats somewhere [...] between expectations and reality.” (p.19). In line with that, Bernstein (1984) states that an organisation’s image represents an impression created to address audience expectations and demands rather than projecting the actual reality. Connecting this to an organisational context, the image of an organisation can have a significant influence on how clients and external actors perceive and understand what an organisation stands for (Alvesson, 2004), which is highly influenced by the way employees communicate about their organisation to the external environment (Empson, 2004). Hence, the establishment of a positive image and reputation is dependent on the support of respective organisational members as they serve as

the active provider of a service and therefore closely collaborate and communicate with the client organisation (Alvesson, 2004). Consequently, a misalignment of organisational member's behaviour and communication leads to an undermining of image (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Similarly, Alvesson (2004) argues that in order to maintain and communicate an image accordingly, it needs to be aligned and overlap with organisational identity.

Rhetoric can be explained as *persuasive talk* (Alvesson, 2004) or the art of persuasion. It is misleading to think that this talk ought to be based on objective reality or facts. Instead, it is rather based on the aim of convincing others (Alvesson, 2004). Especially in KIFs rhetoric represents a significant capability among its employees that is useful in negotiations and client conversations (Alvesson, 2001). Considering the product they sell is their service, they have to engage in much verbal interaction where they have to sell their qualities and expertise credibly in order to get buy-in and collaboration (Alvesson, 2004).

### **2.2.2 The Concept of Identity**

As indicated above, the concept of identity is particularly relevant for KIFs and thus consultancies, as it provides, besides other aspects, an internal foundation for organisations to work with an image (Alvesson, 2004). According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016), identity stems from individual understanding of and identification with values, goals and aspiration. Thus, the concept of identity elaborates on the subjectivity of how people are connected to their work, where it mainly deals with the question of ““who am I?”” (p. 1) and provides guidance for behaviour (Alvesson & Empson, 2008). Hence, through individual identification, one represents whether one differs from others or associate's aspects of sameness (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). However, scholars mostly refer to social identity, which implies the identification of an individual to a certain organisational group and context rather than focusing on it as an individual issue (Alvesson, 2004). Thus, identity is understood as socially constructed dealing with the question of ““who are we?”” (p. 127) and therefore subjective and changeable over time while it influences several factors such as interaction, motivation, behaviour and communication which have high influence on image respectively (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson, Kärreman & Sullivan, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

### Organisational identity

As organisational identity is a type of social identity, it also takes on an essential component in the concept of identity as both aspects, social and organisational identity, influence each other (Alvesson, Kärreman & Sullivan, 2015). Organisational identification refers to how organisational members identify with their organisation, which represents an ongoing process, as an individual aligns its personal view with that of the organisation and reflects upon it (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Simultaneously, organisational members determine what an organisation stands for and what unique aspects are that differentiate them as an organisational group from others (Alvesson & Empson, 2008). In line with that, scholars argue that through organisational identification, individuals create meaning and understanding for certain behaviour and ways things are done within an organisation, which shape organisational members identity respectively (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

A strong organisational identity can be advantageous for the organisation itself but also for the organisational member (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). A strong organisational identity may lead to employees showing loyalty to a company and demonstrating commitment, which results in improved performance and increased motivation, respectively (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Jetten, O'Brien & Trindall, 2002). In addition, the strong identification with an organisation encourages the individual to adapt his or her personal perspective to that of the organisation and thus to follow through (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). With regard to the individual employee, organisational identity enhances the development of a stronger sense of belongingness (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Jetten, O'Brien & Trindall, 2002).

### **2.2.3 Organisational Culture**

The concept of identity draws upon different resources where one represents organisational culture (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). Researchers are far from agreeing on one single definition of culture, so there exist a variety of possible definitions and interpretations around the concept (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). The definition of the term ranges from underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted behaviour to outwardly represented values and artefacts such as architecture, furniture or clothing (Schein, 2009). According to Alvesson & Sveningsson (2016), organisational culture can be understood as an ambiguous phenomenon

that is hard to grasp and commonly consists of key aspects such as a shared understanding, beliefs, norms and values. The fact that the concept of culture, as ambiguous and hard to grasp implies, itself cannot be measured (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). In order to understand the concept of organisational culture, scholars often refer to a study by Hofstede, Neuijen, Daval Ohayv & Sanders (1990) on organisational culture which entails seven characteristics to define the concept. Additionally, Smircich (1983) states that literature on organisational change distinguishes between two perspectives. The first refers to culture as a variable and thus as something an organisation has, whereas the other perspective considers culture as a root metaphor, thus as something that an organisation is (Smircich, 1983). More in line with the latter notion, Alvesson & Sveningsson (2016) argue, that culture is expressed in language, stories, rituals as well as behaviour of individuals and therefore provides meaning.

Concerning the concept of identity, literature points out that culture is a crucial component to distinguish oneself from others (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). According to Alvesson (1995), KIF's and thus consultancies, present outstanding organisational values, beliefs, and rituals that help organisational members to differentiate themselves more clearly from others and conversely to represent this distinction to the outside world (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Consequently, culture is a crucial element in answering what an organisation and its individuals stand for (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

### **2.3 Challenges Emerging from a Misalignment between Image and Identity**

In the previous part of this literature review, we have built a foundation in order to secure for the reader's understanding of our empirical material and later on answer our research question. In our discussion, we discuss what challenges may arise from the way that Nordics Consulting consults change projects and thus now introduce some theory on the aspect of challenges.

#### Trust

Dominant literature argues that a misalignment between a KIF's organisational identity and image can lead to distrust in the eyes of the public, and most importantly, in the eyes of clients (Alvesson, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). However, one of the most important elements in the consultant-client relationship and thus indicators for successful change projects is trust (Chalutz Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, 2011). Building trust can be challenging for consultancies since

they do not hold any special certifications or accreditations that confirm and assure their knowledge and expertise (Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003). Studies have shown that commitment to change projects from employees increases with the trust they put in consultants (Chalutz Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, 2011). Thus, if commitment emerges from trust, trust is essential in order to implement change initiatives at a client company successfully. Belkhodja, Karuranga, and Giasson Morin (2012) argue that in order to gain trust consultants and clients need to develop a common language and assumptions and should collaboratively work on change initiatives where knowledge from both sides is valued and considered as vital for the development of solutions. If clients, however, get confused about what the service firm actually stands for, due to ambiguities in consultant's work and behaviour this can lead to increased uncertainty and mistrust (Alvesson, 2004) and thus significantly slow down the change process as client members resist change initiatives.

### Resistance

According to literature, one of the main reasons for the failure of change projects is resistance among organisational members (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). One can distinguish between two forms of resistance, namely, *passive* and *active* resistance. While the latter is characterised for instance by being critical, finding fault, accusing, and undermining, the former is recognised by procrastinating, agreeing in person but not following through, and withholding information or support (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). This can be particularly challenging in consulting projects with a processual approach to change as they are dependent on the commitment and engagement of the client organisation's members (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Fleming and Spicer (2007) present four faces of resistance, where one of them demonstrates *resistance as escape*. Escape here refers to "cognitive distancing" (p. 39) as a means to "mentally disengage from the world of work" (p. 38). This process can be expressed through cynicism, irony, dis-identification, and scepticism (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Cynicism and scepticism are also mentioned by Alvesson (2004), who argues that a misalignment between image and identity may lead to these forms of resistance both internally and externally of a PSF.

### **3. Methodology**

In this chapter, we introduce our methodological approach to the reader. This enables us to provide justifications for the chosen research design and thus secures transparency. Further, it allows the reader to follow throughout and to understand our upcoming analysis of collected empirical material. In the beginning, we thus elaborate on the philosophical grounding this master thesis is based on. Consequently, we provide a description of our research design and process, followed by an insight into the limitations and credibility of this study.

#### **3.1 Philosophical Grounding**

As we attempt to study and understand how a contrast between an organisation's image and identity of a consultancy can facilitate a sustainable change, we emphasise the importance to analyse how they construct their image and how they understand and perceive their organisational identity. For this purpose, it is useful to work within the assumption of a socially constructed reality rather than one objective meaning as this enables us to focus on the perceived realities of our interviewees (Prasad, 2017). Given the fact that we adopt an interpretative perspective, the necessity exists to consider discourse and language as this facilitates the understanding of meaning and subjective truths (Prasad, 2017). Thus, we intend to gain knowledge about image and identity construction through understanding the subjective realities of our interviewees as illustrated by their perceptions of the world through discourse, language, metaphors, and symbols rather than through finding an objective truth.

During our research, we adopted the abductive approach, as it entails properties of deductive and inductive studies (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). This approach is in line with the hermeneutic tradition as it allows us to keep in mind pre-existing knowledge of theories and concepts about a phenomenon, which applies to a deductive approach, but also remain open towards new perspectives and understandings of our collected empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). This is important in order to secure for a meaningful theoretical analysis, as one has to keep in mind that our existing knowledge and background may influence our research process (Prasad, 2017). Considering the limited time frame of this thesis, it is suitable



to start with empirical data and underlying theoretical concepts, as this secures for a preliminary knowledge base and prevents ignorant interpretations (Alvesson, 2003).

## **3.2 Research Design and Process**

The research design aims at giving the conducted research a structure and subsequently develop a suitable data collection method in order to answer the given research questions (Easterby-Smith, 2018). As stated above, we follow an interpretative approach, which indicates that the research method chosen is of qualitative nature and focuses on interviews, observations and secondary data provided by our contact person. Our aim is to investigate how a contrast between organisational identity and image can facilitate a sustainable change. Subsequently, it is essential for the researcher to investigate on how individuals interpret certain phenomena and how they experience their work and industry which indicates that we aim to understand how their experiences and perceptions are connected to a larger whole (Prasad, 2017). In line with that, we only focused on only one company in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the prevailing perceptions of our interviewees concerning the phenomenon.

### **3.2.1 Collection of Empirical Material**

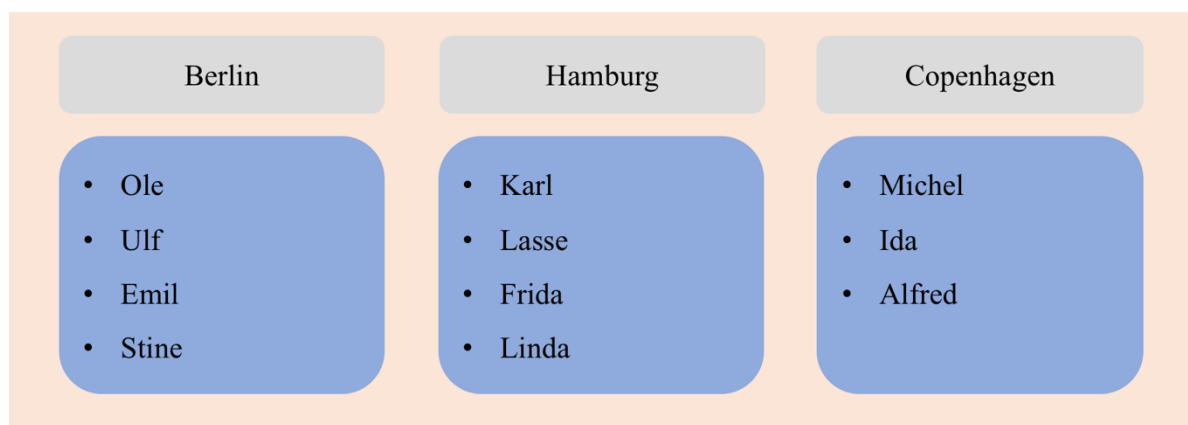
In the following part, we elaborate more in-depth on our data collection. We thereby focus on how we conducted our interviews, on observation and sources.

#### **Semi-structured interviews**

We focused on the subjective understandings of our interviewees that constitute individual, organisational behaviour. Therefore, our interviews served as the main source of data collection as they helped us to understand and follow different perspectives of our interviewees (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The use of semi-structured interviews enabled us to ask a certain set of questions to each interview participant but still allowed us to incorporate follow-up questions upon their descriptions, as recommended by Kvale (1983). We identified this method as beneficial since our interviewees were able to direct the conversation onto another aspect and thereby widen the interview through open response possibilities (Saunders, Lewis

& Thornhill, 2009). In addition, we believe that using this approach offered a wider scope of interpretation for our interviewees since they had the opportunity to formulate their response in a way that was appropriate for them. Moreover, it was possible for our interviewees to elaborate on own stories and experiences and to develop own ideas to answer the question in our interviews. However, during the conduction of our interviews, we were constantly aware of the subjectivity of our interviewees' statements as we understood them as influenced by a wide variety of factors within an organisation (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000).

In order to secure for a representative analysis, we interviewed eleven consultants at Nordics Consulting. More specific, we interviewed three consultants from the office in Copenhagen, four consultants from the office in Berlin and four consultants from the office in Hamburg. In order to provide various perspectives on our topic, we interviewed consultants from different levels, meaning that we interviewed directors, (senior) managers as well as consultants from Nordics Consulting. Additionally, we travelled to the respective offices in Copenhagen, Hamburg and Berlin in order to secure face-to-face interviews. We are convinced that face-to-face interviews helped us to gain more insights about our interviewees' daily work and how they understand situations, as a more comfortable atmosphere and a conversation on a personal level was created (Alvesson, 2003). As we refer to individual understanding, feelings and perceptions of our interviews in our study, one needs to be aware that these may differ in part from the overall understanding of the organisation. Thus, by keeping company and consultants anonymous by changing their names and neglecting to mention their position in our thesis, we hoped for substantial and meaningful data (Figure 4). Each of our interviews lasted around 40-60 minutes.



*Figure 4: Fictive Names of Interviewees of the Respective Office*

### Observation

Besides the conduction of semi-structured interviews, we observed behaviour and acts of our interviewees, which increase the credibility of our interview material (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, we did not only pay attention to what our interviewees said but also to how they talked, as we assume that the non-verbal communication, i.e. body language and facial expression in a certain situation, often provides a more in-depth insight into the emotional world of an individual than verbal communication (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### Secondary sources

In addition to the interviews we conducted and the observations we made, we used publicly accessible brochures and information from Nordics Consulting website as well as internal documents such as project offers provided by our contact person. Those helped us to understand the background of our case and to gain first insights about how Nordics Consulting works and approaches change projects. This background knowledge enabled us to come up with questions for our interviews (Bowen, 2009).

### Collaboration

To ensure that the same questions as well as reflecting follow-up questions were asked, we conducted all interviews together. Thus, we could guarantee that we had the same information at hand at all time. We recorded each interview in order to enable reproduction and reflection of what was said afterwards (Longhurst, 2003). During the interviews, one of us took notes, whereas the other one focused on the facial expressions and gestures of the interviewees when answering the question. Nevertheless, we did not decide on what questions would be asked by which one of us to create a spontaneous and relaxed atmosphere for us as well as for the interviewee. Additionally, we formulated our questions as neutral as possible so that the interviewee had the possibility to answer as broad and valuing as they felt is appropriate. In order to identify aspects that we found interesting or that were not entirely understandable for us at that moment, a continuous transcription of the interviews was a matter of course for us (Longhurst, 2003). We used the transcription of the interviews as an opportunity to reflect upon and discuss previous interviews and to formulate follow up questions for future interviews (Longhurst, 2003).

### **3.2.2 Analysis of Empirical Material**

As already stated above, all our interviews were recorded and transcribed continuously which allowed us to constantly go over the interviews again, reflect upon what our interviews said and evaluate repetition, metaphors, transitions, similarities and differences as recommended by (Ryan and Bernard (2003). Each of us reread all interviews in order to make sure that all important information concerning our topic was identified. After that, quotes which we identified most useful in order to answer the guiding questions of our thesis were collected in an Excel sheet and then categorised into different subthemes and themes which is also known as the process coding (Gibson & Brown, 2009). According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), the coding process transforms data from an explicit to a general level, wherefore the creativity of the researcher is essential in order to evaluate suitable themes and subthemes. For this purpose, we started with focusing on similarities and repetition in the gathered data to develop overall themes. Topics that appeared most relevant for answering our research questions were put into a theoretical context (Ryan & Bernhard, 2003). Throughout the analysis of our collected empirical material, we focused on neglecting our assumptions and prior theoretical knowledge about the concept of image and identity in order to reduce the risk of possible distortions. This allowed us to not only scratch on the surface but go more in-depth and recognise less obvious circumstances and matters.

### **3.3 Credibility**

One way to attest the credibility of qualitative studies is proposed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) and their theory of source criticism. This approach focuses on the question of distortion of information. Since we conducted interviews in order to collect empirical material, we got our information from narrating sources, meaning individuals that expressed their subjective realities and perception of past events and experiences to us. However, much of this information may get distorted as it emerges in reality and is experienced by individuals who subjectify much information through the individual perception of these experiences to researchers who as well interpret these in a certain way. Source criticism concerns itself with this possible distortion and attempts to reduce such risks. Four criteria are used to evaluate the credibility of a source – *authenticity*, *bias*, *distance*, and *dependence*.

The criterion of authenticity examines the source's reliability in regards to its nature, meaning whether "the source *is* a source" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 71). During this research, we considered all sources to be what they claim to be, thereby not intentionally distorting any information. This leads to a confirmation of the authenticity of this research. The second criterion, bias, refers to the source's interest in distorting facts and information, may it be conscious or unconscious (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). By the assumption of a socially constructed reality with subjective truths, we are aware of the fact that information provided by our interviewees is merely based on their individual perception of events and thus subjective. Confronting interviewees with a specific topic, thus might lead to bias. However, our awareness and constant incorporation of this matter throughout our data analysis should reduce bias to the smallest amount possible.

Additionally, we attempted to gain a holistic picture by interviewing several employees at Nordics Consulting and thereby putting together different perspectives to an overall picture (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 73). Distance regards whether a source is reliable in terms of time and space (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). In other words, the more distant an event is, the less valuable it becomes (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). As all our interviewees currently work at Nordics Consulting and thus in their stories referred to current or recent projects and events, this criterion can be neglected. The last criterion, dependence, regards "the number of hands the information has passed through from the source in question" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 113). Since all interviews were conducted by the researchers themselves, we gathered all material from first hand, thereby allowing for a neglect of this criterion.

Further, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) suggest that empathy enriches collected information with meaning. While behaviour merely presents external, obvious facts, there exists an internal side to actions that is filled with meaning (Collingwood, 1994). This meaning cannot be easily captured; however, empathy provides one way to grasp it, argue Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009). Through trying to understand their emotions, personalities, and motives, we attempted to incorporate empathy throughout our analysis and not draw conclusions too quickly but first think about possible reasons for their behaviour.

### 3.4 Limitations and Reflexivity

Certain limitations may reduce the richness and meaningfulness of this thesis. Firstly, due to time and resource constraints, we can only provide a limited breadth and depth concerning our research. Further, the qualitative nature of our research design and the adoption of an interpretivist tradition imply research findings based on subjective interpretations and understandings of the researchers themselves (Alvesson, 2004). Even though we stated earlier that we designed and posed our questions neutrally, one has to acknowledge that we were not able to entirely neutrally deal with our material due to our prior knowledge from studies and literature as indicated by Prasad (2017). Similarly, this also accounts for our interviewees as they dispose knowledge from practice or their academic background as well, when answering our questions. Consequently, when asking questions about how they perceive and approach organisational change, we got a variety of different answers. Moreover, due to the limited scope of this thesis, we focused on analysing quotes that we identified as most interesting in regard to our research question and empirical story. Consequently, one might criticise that we do not present a fully diverse picture as we left out some voices of our interviewees. However, we believe that leaving out some quotes does not harm the meaningfulness of our analysis that we crafted around those most valuable for our research question and most engaging for our readers.

Even though all our interviewees are consultants focusing on similar work tasks, they still belong to different offices and have different academic and personal backgrounds that shape their understanding of organisational change. According to Schaefer and Alvesson (2017), researchers need to carefully reflect, evaluate and question interviews, which leads to the engagement in source critique mentioned earlier. Thus, researchers have to be aware of biased answers due to different backgrounds of interviewees and consider these differences carefully when generalising assumptions.

Another limitation of our research is the fact that it was not possible for us to select the interview partners ourselves. Instead, our contact person at Nordics Consulting selected those for us. As a result, one could argue that interviewees were selected based on what they might or might not say. However, we feel that interviewees were rather open and relaxed during interviews and spoke freely.

Despite the above, a key criterion for us in order to ensure a meaningful and representative study was to remain reflexive about the subjectivity of our interpretations. By this, we avoided being blinded by our prior theoretical assumptions and facilitate a contribution of newly emerging ideas. This is in line with Alvesson's (2003) understanding of a reflexive approach to research, which enables the researcher to welcome new perspectives and interpretations.

## **4. Empirical Analysis**

In this chapter, we start by presenting the background of the case. Subsequently, we analyse our empirical findings concerning how Nordics Consulting provides their service, namely organisational change, how they talk about it and in regard to that, which challenges they face due to their approach to change.

### **4.1 Case Background**

The frame for our empirical study is provided by the Danish consultancy firm, Nordics Consulting, or more precisely its Management Consulting unit for the department People & Change. In our study, we investigate how Nordics Consulting offers and implements its service, meaning how consultants approach change projects. Before the presentation of our empirical material, we first introduce the case company. The following case introduction is based on official internal documents provided by our contact person at Nordics Consulting.

Nordics Consulting was founded in 1945 by two engineers in Copenhagen, Denmark. After World War II destructions were immense so that the two founders wanted to help start a new development and re-build society. Nordics Consulting thus from the beginning, had a highly humanistic and social visionary approach to business (Document 4). Nowadays, Nordics Consulting has more than 15.000 employees worldwide in 200 offices operating in 35 countries with the strongest presence in Scandinavia, UK, North America, Continental Europe, Middle East, and Asia-Pacific. Nordics Consulting is a consultancy with divisions in Structural Engineering & Architecture, Transport & Infrastructure, Urban Development & Design, Environment & Health, Energy, Water, and Management Consulting (Document 3).

The Management Consulting division has three subdivisions; namely, Policy Advisory & Evaluation, Business Consulting, and People & Change (Document 3). Their division describes its consulting philosophy as being influenced by their Scandinavian roots (Document 2). Therefore, Nordics Consulting strongly focuses on the meaningful participation of those who are and will be affected by the change. The participation of those affected is seen as crucial for the development of a sustainable and suitable solution (Document 6). Additionally, a close cooperation with relevant stakeholders concerning the design and coordination of a change project is seen as a success factor for a sustainable and effective implementation of a change project (Document 1).

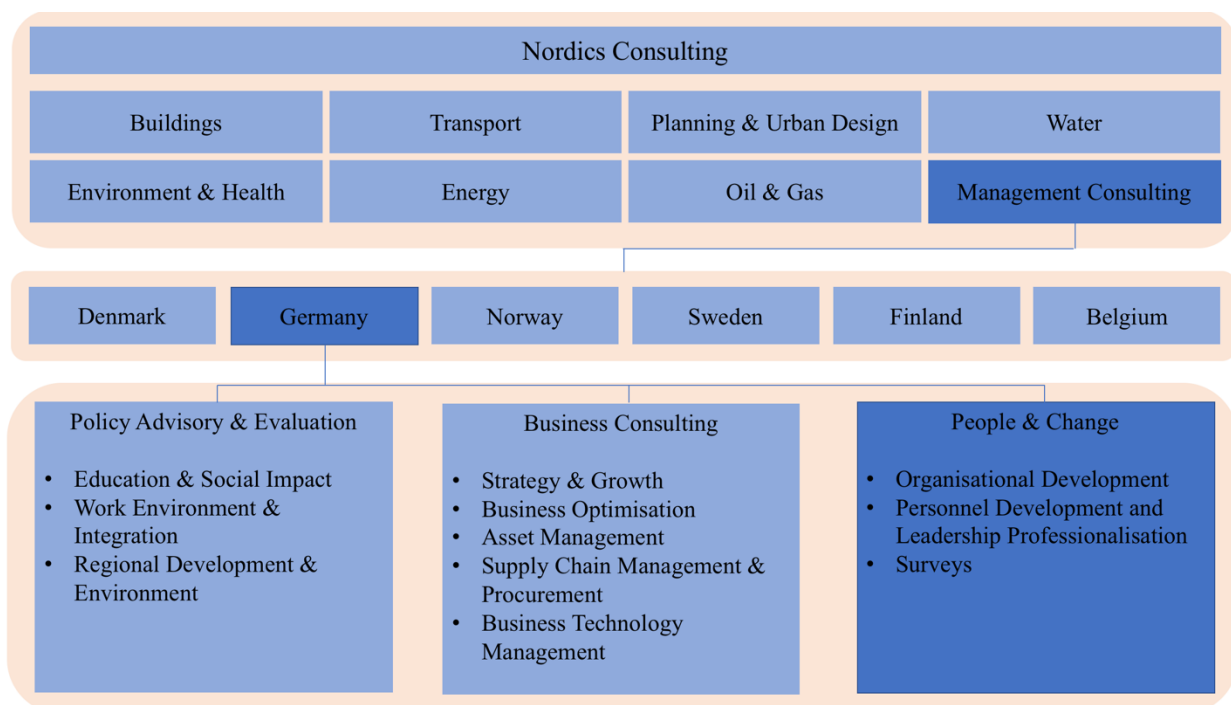


Figure 5: Nordics Consulting Organisation Chart adopted from Document 3

The People & Change division mainly focuses on the topics of *Organisational Development*, *Personnel Development & Leadership Development*, and *Employee Surveys*. They develop customised solutions for clients and have strong local expertise (Document 2). Our interviewees consult mainly public clients, meaning political parties, ministries, higher education institutions or authorities. Services and areas of excellence in People & Change include leadership training and coaching, team development, moderation of workshops, organisational development and design, and human resources management (Document 6).



## 4.2 Empirical Material

In the following part, we analyse and interpret the empirical material we gathered throughout our interviews. Within this analysis, we aim at investigating how a contrast between the image and the organisational identity of a consultancy can facilitate a sustainable change. In order of this, we first describe the market situation that Nordics Consulting is facing in the consulting industry. Consequently, we elaborate on how they blind the client with a hidden agenda by analysing their approach and methods. Afterwards, we illustrate elements that actually describe their understanding of organisational change and culture as well as outline how they understand and become aware of culture. Lastly, we present challenges that Nordics Consulting faces due to the way they approach consulting projects. A summary shall give an overview of the empirical findings and therewith provide a basis for the discussion.

When we first met Stine, our contact person at Nordics Consulting, on our journey, she introduced us to their way of accomplishing real change at client organisation:

*You know, we are operating in a competitive market. Clients pay a lot of money in order to get the 'right' solutions. I mean, efficiency and innovation are highly important for organisations in order to stay competitive in today's world. And then they hire consultants in order to implement changes that bring them closer to their objectives. We are the expert to facilitate these changes for them and should deliver fast and easy-to-implement solutions. But it's not that easy, you know. We at Nordics Consulting feel that change is often way more complex than clients think. Nevertheless, we have to provide a service to clients that meets their demands and expectations in order to survive on the market.*

Based on that problematisation, we developed a narrative as illustrated further down. This narrative does not illustrate a process of how Nordics Consulting approaches a change project. Instead, we aim at providing the reader with a logical order to grasp our empirical material.

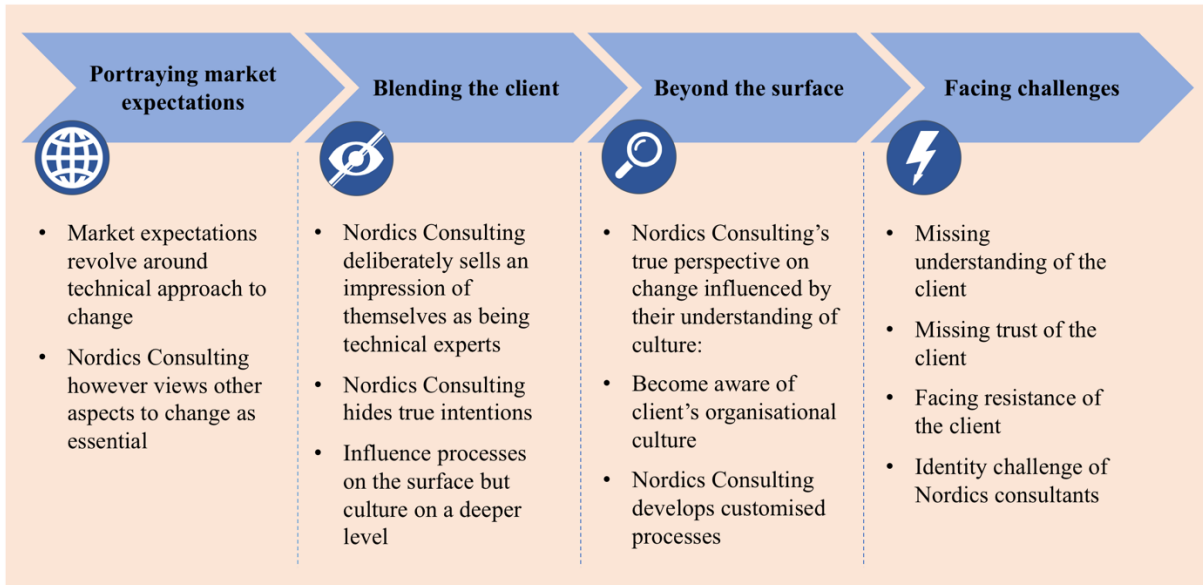
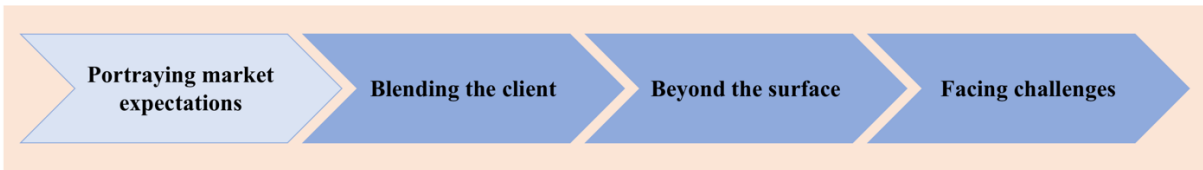


Figure 6: Narrative for the Empirical Material

#### 4.2.1 Portraying Market Expectations



Market expectations for organisational change often revolve around more technical and functional demands as we found during our interviews. As a service provider for the area of change, Nordics Consulting describes the demands of their clients as following:

*Most projects we are assigned to deal with becoming more efficient and innovative, which clients want us to facilitate. (Michel)*

Emil elaborates further:

*Our clients are focused on figures. They expect us to deliver an outcome which is visible to them.*

And Alfred adds:

*In the end, they want us to establish new processes which in the client's eyes are facilitators for a more efficient way of working.*

Market expectations thus revolve around figures and visible outcomes as clients aim for higher innovation and efficiency through improving processes and structure. Our interviewees express a different point of view that they take on:

*Clients often say, "We want to be more efficient and we need to optimise our processes in order to get there". But that's not really what they need, they don't see the complexity of a change. (Ulf)*

From Ulf's quote, we assume that the client lacks the necessary understanding of how change involves other essential aspects to consider and work on besides processes. This implies that it is difficult to deliver or work with something the market does not demand. For example, Emil stresses the importance of organisational culture in change:

*Therefore, with working on their culture, we deliver something they do not want but what we think they need.*

Karl goes on:

*We are never hired to implement a cultural change. The assignment is almost always something different. But still, we would always think about what that means for the organisational culture.*

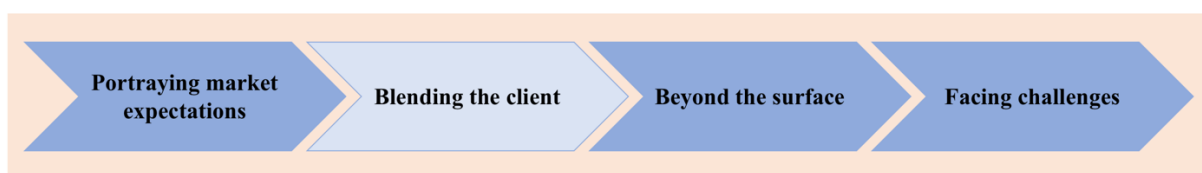
In other words, our interviewees think it is vital for clients to work on their organisational culture, as only so change objectives can be realised in the eyes of Nordics Consulting. However, from this, we also understand that clients see cultural change initiatives often as soft approaches and therefore as less important or appropriate. It can be said that the client's attitude towards cultural change is a central problem for our interviewees. Karl states that the client is never the one to mention culture first. Although Nordics Consulting points out various times in interviews that listening to the client and understanding their needs is an essential capability for consultants, Nordics Consulting seems not to have any problems with ignoring their

demands if consultants think they know better how to achieve a certain objective. This is further illustrated by Ole:

*Sometimes in the process of clarifying the consulting assignment clients say something with a certain attitude like: "The problem is our processes, so we will not talk about leadership or culture." There I thought: "Okay, I guess I know where the problem is here..." You can look at processes, but you also have to involve the client and tell them if processes are not their problem and that they should look in another direction.*

Even though the client might not recognise culture as the problem or worth considering in order to work towards an aspired future, Nordics Consulting does not leave culture out of sight. Thus, we conclude that market expectations usually entail figure-based solutions and functional methods that promise efficient processes. In contrast to that, however, Nordics Consulting has a more sophisticated view of change. Thus, they deliver interventions that take culture and complexity into consideration. In that sense, one could say the client is wrong and does not understand the complexity of the change.

#### **4.2.2 Blending the Client**



Having established market expectations on the one hand, and what Nordics Consulting delivers, on the other hand, we now elaborate on how they try to facilitate organisational change in spite of this. As a consultancy, one is still providing a service, so gaining the trust of the client is important in order to be assigned to a project, which Nordics Consulting is aware of:

*Our aim is that the client views us as qualified enough to solve their problem. (Ida)*

*We think about our outer appearance at the client. As soon as we figured out how they dress and talk, we imitate them. (Lasse)*

The quotes above illustrate that Nordics Consulting attaches great value to what clients think of them. It goes so far that they deliberately dissemble themselves in order to blend in with the client by adopting their language and dress code. Lasse elaborates:

*Showing some specialist knowledge is especially at the beginning of the project important. That is something we deliberately do in the first 5% of the project duration. That is when you are tested by the client whether you actually bring the expertise and knowledge you promised. There we actively control meetings in a way that they recognise our capabilities.*

By demonstrating their industry know-how and professionalism Nordics Consulting presents itself as skilled experts in their particular field of work and thus earn the client's trust as this shows that they can contribute functional solutions and ideas that meet their expectations. This represents an important element in their way of working as it enables them to build a relationship based on trust which means that the client will listen to them and take their considerations seriously.

Emil continues to describe their work content:

*The development of processes only takes up a small part of our work. Actually, two thirds of it is related to culture.*

Lasse elaborates on that:

*Often, we tell the client we work on something like processes or the organisational structure, because that is what the client wants us to do. But we have a hidden agenda that we work on the organisational culture instead.*

The term *hidden agenda* caught our attention. Normally, a hidden agenda implies something bad or nasty, that is used to trick others. In this case, they do trick the client as well, however, it seems like something positive as they try to bring the client closer to their aspired future by working on culture. Lasse explains more detailed how they accomplish that:

*For example, we occupy clients with things in a workshop that seem like useful tools to them but actually enable them in cultural management. One tool called the reflecting team. We want a management team that we are consulting right now to become more reflexive. They should use their differences to reflect about mutual problems and develop solutions for them. But they do not primarily understand that as cultural management.*

Karl illustrates another example of their approach:

*If the client for example wants a human resource requirement plan, then we can do that and, in the end, they will have a number. But the way we get there is quite different compared to other consultancies. We would develop such a plan methodically in cooperation with employees and workshops with the help of a vision of the aspired future: Where do we want to go? How do tasks look like? What kind of personnel is needed? So we try to go through the whole process with the client, include their ideas and think future-oriented.*

Thus, they provide them with tools and occupy them in workshops that seem useful to client members but actually enable softer skills and cultural management implicitly. By this, they blend the client about why they are actually educating them and sell them something that satisfies the client but also enables Nordics Consulting to facilitate substantial initiatives. Thereby, they keep it a secret what is going on in reality. Similarly, Alfred mentions one way to address and solve deeper, underlying problems:

*Let's say there are two employees who have a project together but it's not going so well, and I recognise the problem or difference in opinion between those two. Then I'm going to pose a question that points to that issue at the next workshop, like "Well, how do you measure your performance or success in that project?" And then they discuss that and recognise that they have been working in different ways all along. So I'll implicitly play them out against each other so that they see the underlying issues without me mediating between the two. That way, they have to talk about it and solve it for themselves. (Alfred)*

This quote shows that Nordics Consulting sometimes poses questions that superficially target something important for the client's performance or success, but actually uncovers underlying issues that might have led to the problem in the first place. By choosing hard words like performance and success, Alfred avoids talking about softer issues, which shows that rhetoric is an important element in manipulating the perception of a client has an impact on their work and the consultant himself.

Karl elaborates:

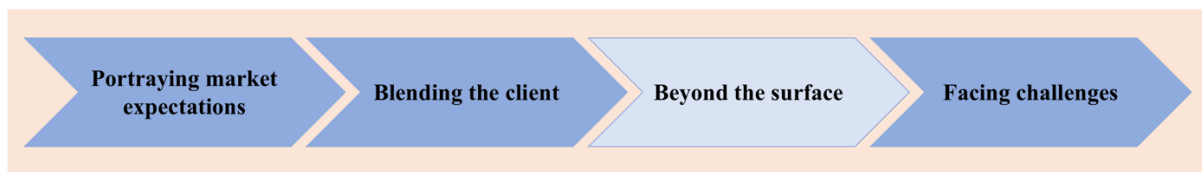
*In workshops we work a lot with the theory of appreciative inquiry. The idea behind the appreciative inquiry is to not analyse all the difficulties and instead focus on the positive experiences and build on them. We talk a lot about "In which direction do we have to develop ourselves? What would be the ideal and what are necessary steps to achieve it?" with clients but try to implicitly and subconsciously enable a talk about culture. And this is a concrete activity to trigger a sustainable change and not just a one-time thing. It is important to sustainably change managers and employees in their attitude through enabling moments of reflection.*

Throughout the use of the theory of appreciative inquiry, which focuses on the joint construction of a desired future by building in positive experiences, Nordics consultants try to develop a shared picture of a future together with the client's organisational members. Karl points out that the aim is not only to engage employees in problem identification and solving, but it is also to change the attitude of the participants by developing a sense and understanding of the change.

Finally, it can be said that Nordics consultants blend the client or in other words, work with a hidden agenda in order to accomplish real change. They do provide the client with what he is asking for, but also with what Nordics Consulting thinks he needs. In this, they pursue tools and methods, for example, workshops and appreciative inquiry, which seem functional to the client. These methods enable them to work with culture without talking too much about it. In every change project where the client demands an improvement in processes, they run workshops which influence their processes. However, their actual work in these interventions triggers a change in organisational culture due to influencing their way of working with each other and communicating with each other. A change in the organisation of meetings,

collaboration and other work procedures thus will have an influence on their processes, but on a deeper level, it actually affects culture. This fact, however, is hidden from the client in order to make the client think of Nordics consultants as being knowledgeable experts with technical solutions.

### **4.2.3 Beyond the Surface**



The above illustrates that Nordics Consulting is aware of what clients want and thus create an impression that meets those expectations. This impression implies a more technical and instrumental perspective on change, which results in Nordics Consulting providing tools that seem functional and useful on the surface. However, throughout our interviews, it became evident that they actually have a different perspective on how to accomplish change. This is illustrated by Ole:

*To simply hang up posters everywhere and say, for example, "we are agile now", (which some consultants do) and then assume this facilitates change, that is just bullshit.*

In other words, Ole refers back to clients' and some consultancies' simplistic view on change as they neglect important factors such as culture and context.

### **Understanding of organisational culture**

Our interviewees understand culture as an essential component for change that always needs to be considered:

*Organisational culture is important because it ultimately determines how things work. You may be able to draw a process, but how it is lived depends on the culture. Culture*



*is always something which cannot be written down like a process, it is more informal.*  
(Ole)

Following this quote, Ole finds that organisational culture significantly influences all processes and dynamics in an organisation on an invisible level. Stine elaborates on their understanding of culture:

*Culture describes what is not formally decided upon. It does influence and guide you by providing a direction for actions and behaviour, but no one could formally demand these from you.*

Concluding these quotes, we understand that for our interviewees, one significant aspect of culture is informality. Similarly, Ida illustrates:

*My understanding of culture? Difficult...I would say on one hand it is highly informal but on the other hand I also believe that language forms culture somehow.*

For Frida, language is as well an essential component of organisational culture:

*We always assume that language is something elementary, the way we talk to each other and which language we use. That creates a lot of culture and atmosphere.*

What Frida means with this is that vocabulary used by organisational members can influence culture to a great extent as certain words or phrases signal what attitude one might hold towards situations and circumstances. Lasse continues:

*Language is always connected to a certain context. You can create a lot of different feelings with language. In order to manage organisational change, one needs to possess language sensitivity.*

From this, we conclude that the way in which language is used, the vocal strength and the choice of words, can evoke and influence certain feelings and thus justify and influence organisational behaviour. Nordics Consulting understands that language mediates organisational culture and thus formulates a vital part of organisational culture. We assume

their shared sophisticated understanding of culture and change influences and shapes Nordics Consulting organisational assumptions and beliefs to a large extent and ultimately determines the way they work.

### Making culture visible

One aspect of their work portrays their way of becoming aware of organisational culture. As Nordics Consulting determines language as an essential component of culture, Karl explains:

*Culture can be made visible through language because that is how it is executed. It is about words which are used and whether there are question marks or exclamation marks at the end of sentences.*

In addition to language and the way of communicating within an organisation, Emil also brings in the aspect of listening carefully to how managers and employees communicate with each other:

*You pick up a lot of cultural circumstances by listening carefully to the conversations among employees and managers. How they talk about something with each other can be quite different from organisation to organisation.*

Emil adds:

*And individual discussions help us to figure out informal power structures.*

This quote outlines the significance of informal power relations that can highly influence organisational culture and change processes. Emil describes that through individual conversations, they try to understand the different point of views of organisational actors and what their underlying interests might be.

*You have to take the time to understand and reflect on the culture. Sometimes we re-enact certain scenes and situations we experienced at a client: What exactly happened? How do we interpret this? What are the reasons behind this? What are the reasons behind the reasons? (Lasse)*

What Lasse emphasises is that through observations and reflecting upon them critically, fundamental problems can be identified, that could not be recognised in face-to-face discussions with organisational members. These problems or cultural phenomena can usually be deeply rooted and do not always include the obvious problem in an organisation. In order to be able to assess or understand these deeply rooted problems as a consultant, it is important for Lasse to empathise with and recapitulate what has happened within an organisation.

The above reinforces how much significance Nordics Consulting attaches to culture and thus, how values, assumptions, and beliefs revolve a lot around understanding the complexity of culture that comes with managing organisational change.

### Reinventing the wheel

In fact, they think that change can only be accomplished when considering context and culture and thus differentiate themselves from other consultancies:

*At Nordics Consulting we are not working with pre-defined roadmaps and I do not believe in working with roadmaps or any kind of tool box. Of course, a lot of consultancies like McKinsey work with that quite successfully but if I'm honest, I have never experienced a project, in which the desired process did not change to at least 50-60%. (Emil)*

Emil's statement shows once again that with their perspective on change are highly committed to what they stand for as a consultancy and thus position themselves accordingly in the field. In contrast to other consultancies, pre-defined models or plans on how to best approach a change project do not exist at Nordics Consulting. This is further elaborated by Karl, who states that Nordics Consulting sees the client's employees as a central element in a change project, which can be illustrated by the following quote:

*Every human is different and as organisations consist of humans a roadmap for cultural change cannot work.*

And Ulf adds:

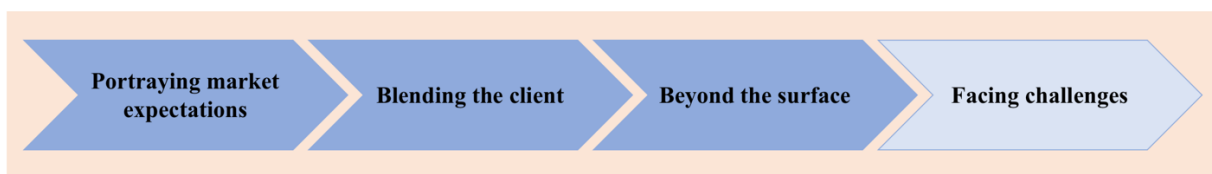
*I would say that we are kind of reinventing the wheel with every project, which makes it an individualised process for each client but that is also a cumbersome task.*

The metaphor of reinventing the wheel used by Ulf is interesting and illustrative for Nordics Consulting's approach to change. Reinventing the wheel contains a high degree of individualism and innovative variations of a process but can also cause negative aspects such as the time-consuming redesign of something that may not guarantee anything in the end. This perception of change processes leads to and enables their processual approach to change. In line with that, Frida elaborates:

*We believe that we are rather process experts- so we have an idea of how we methodically, with which elements and with which kind of dialogues and questions we can develop the client further.*

Based on the previous quote, it can be said that many of our interviewees do not identify themselves as content experts or the providers of suitable solutions for a client. Instead, Nordics consultants see themselves more as assistants or guiding references that provide methods and promote dialogue in order to enable sustainable change. We thus conclude that they try to sell themselves as experts at the beginning of a change project by blending clients with technical tools. However, their actual understanding of change calls for more profound and meaningful interventions that take complexity and culture into consideration.

#### **4.2.4 Facing Challenges**



Due to adopting a processual perspective on change and their way of working with it we observe that Nordics Consulting is basically not working according to the impression they convey to clients. This, however, can cause challenges which need to be considered in order to work with it successfully.

## Missing understanding

Ulf mentions a difficulty that comes with their approach:

*Our approach can be quite difficult in an industry that is used to rather formal and bureaucratic work activities. Often some employees can't really relate to or understand our methods and see no sense in them.*

We notice by this quote that Nordics Consulting sometimes faces the problem that clients do not understand or are unable to make sense of their approach due to not being used to softer methods that differ much from what clients usually expect and demand from consultancies. It seems to be difficult for Nordics Consulting to trigger talk about culture implicitly:

*It can be difficult when we try to influence organisational culture on the side or indirectly through our actions and then clients are irritated sometimes and ask "What are you doing? We wanted to talk about processes and tasks." (Ulf)*

This quote illustrates how clients can get confused during change projects when Nordics Consulting does not follow through on what was agreed upon and does something different than what clients demand. Thus, clients might detect that Nordics Consulting is trying to blend them with a service they provide, which does not match their expectations. Confusion among organisational members of the client firm can evoke further problems as they might lose trust in the consultants.

## Building trust

Trust is, however, an essential component for the relationship between consultants and clients:

*If the project is about change, a certain trust-based relationship is in fact necessary. Not in a friendship-kind-of-way but so that the client takes you and your thoughts and arguments seriously.*

For Nordics Consulting, a trustful relationship forms a common ground, where consultant and client meet on an equal level and take each other's thoughts and arguments seriously.

Ole adds:

*[...] it is not only a topic at the management level but also with the employees themselves who also participate in the workshops. If they don't trust you then it is difficult to establish an atmosphere receptive to change. (Ole)*

Ole emphasises that it is equally important to establish a trustworthy basis with the management as well as with the employees of a client organisation. Since Nordics Consulting's participative approach is based on collaboration in interviews and interventions, a certain openness and honesty is necessary.

### Facing resistance

If trust is not existent organisational members of the client company might resist Nordics Consulting's change initiatives and interventions:

*The lack of willingness to make decisions, to act and to reflect is, therefore, a major challenge in our approach. (Emil)*

This quote shows that resistance to their methods can severely hinder the change process from progressing and sticking to the organisation. Emil continues:

*With our approach we are always just indirectly influencing culture. If organisational members of the client do not implement what you implicitly try to work on with them then you are powerless.*

Concluding, we observe that active resistance among client members who do not want to participate in or implement change initiatives can severely hinder Nordics consultants in their work as it prevents the change process from progressing.

## Internal Challenge at Nordics Consulting

Our empirical data also led us to a challenge that Nordics Consulting is facing internally when talking about their specific approach to change. We were able to find a few critical voices among the consultants that have a slightly different perspective or are at least a little more distanced from the participative and soft approach to cultural change.

*Our approach to change at Nordics Consulting always implies and entails asking the client questions like: “How do you feel? How do you see yourself? How would you like to be caressed? How do you want to caress others?” I don’t really know if that’s the only way to go. (Emil)*

Here, Emil implies the aspects that their approach carries in contrast to other consultancies. When stating this, Emil had a very ironic tone of voice which visualises his distancing from Nordics Consulting’s understanding of change. Caressing is a soft way of showing someone affection or empathy and by using this description, Emil is mocking their own methods. Comparing their approach to cultural change with caressing clients further emphasises the irony that is generated by him. In line with this, Ole says:

*Working with culture is always kind of esoteric.*

Later he elaborates:

*I doubt clients are excited about fooling around in workshops for a year and then pay 200.000 euros.*

Esoterism is a philosophical doctrine which is supposed to lead to self-awareness and self-actualisation. However, as an adjective, it is in colloquial language often a derogatory way to describe something foolish or odd. Further, by describing their approach as “fooling around in workshops” he most evidently ridicules Nordics Consulting’s approach due to it being rather soft. From Ole’s perspective, the soft approach to change alone is not enough to influence culture:

*Coaching only is so... “Ohh, we’re gonna change the culture with 6000 people through coaching their mayor”. That’s kind of limp in my opinion. For me, it’s not enough to accompany a learning process and do that question-answer game, I really want to change something.*

Here again, some irony is observable through his choice of words. From his point of view, culture is very much influenceable through hard measures which are usually missing at Nordics Consulting.

#### **4.2.5 Summary of Chapter**

In this analysis, we started with focusing on how Nordics Consulting perceives market expectations in the consulting industry. They described how client organisations mainly attach value to facts and figures and aim at innovation and efficiency, all in all, they face a very performance driven environment. Nordics Consulting expressed their doubts about the focus area of clients, indicating there are other aspects to change than just structure and processes, such as organisational culture and complexity which they consider as well in their projects.

In the next part, we illustrated how Nordics Consulting encounters the market expectations that differ from their perspective on change. Especially at the beginning of the project, Nordics Consulting pays attention to selling themselves in a certain way to clients that assures them of Nordics Consulting’s technical know-how and expertise in the area of change management. As clients often lack a profound understanding of culture, Nordics Consulting feels the need to hide their true intentions when implementing change initiatives that ought to uncover and solve cultural issues. With the help of workshops, appreciative inquiry, inclusiveness, and reflection they occupy the client with useful tools and activities that on the surface influence processes and structure but on a deeper level actually trigger a more profound cultural change.

In the section *Beyond the surface*, we uncovered Nordics Consulting’s actual perspective on change, which is influenced strongly by their understanding of culture. Here, they attach significant meaning to informality and language. Further, in order to implement change initiatives, they view it as essential to become aware of the prevailing culture of the client organisation, which can be done through observing their conversations, language, behaviour



and reflecting on these. Viewing culture as complex and unique to every organisation requires Nordics Consulting to customise their approach for every single client.

Lastly, we described typical challenges that Nordics Consulting is facing due to their approach to change. Challenges that come directly with their approach encompass missing understanding and trust, as well as resistance among client members. Another challenge we found throughout our interviews can be viewed as rather internal for Nordics Consulting since some consultants expressed a distanced perspective to their approach to cultural change. From their point of view, a combination of soft and hard measures is needed in order to influence culture successfully.

## **5. Discussion**

Our empirical material above provided us with insights on our case company and built a foundation in order to discuss our guiding questions for this thesis. In the following part, we first outline characteristics of Nordics Consulting's organisational identity and in what relation it stands to their image. Later on, we illustrate how they facilitate sustainable change despite the relation between image and identity. From our findings and conclusion, we developed two paradoxes that facilitate a better understanding and position our thesis in a more general theoretical context. Lastly, a discussion on challenges and problems that may arise from their approach shall secure for a more critical voice in our thesis and provide the reader with implications for theory that follow from our study.

### **5.1 Relation between Image and Identity**

Nordics Consulting is a PSF operating in the management consulting sector and is thus aware of the necessity to secure for a good reputation and image in the public eye, especially among clients. This is in line with Alvesson (2004), who argues that PSFs are very much dependent on a positive reputation and thus are particularly good at presenting themselves as knowledge experts. As described in our analysis, Nordics Consulting pays attention to showing expert knowledge in their projects in order to symbolise the client their qualities. For example, one

document we were provided with from Nordics Consulting is named *Offer Process Optimisation* and is a real offer they made for a potential client to sell their services (Document 2). We argue the term process optimisation sounds rather technical and thus communicates a particular message to clients which Nordics Consulting is aware of. They tend to copy the client in terms of language and clothing so that clients feel comfortable and safe with them. Similarly, Alvesson (1993) claims that consultants are merely good at adapting to certain contexts and possess valuable interpersonal and communicative skills instead of actual knowledge and expertise. According to him, consultancies thus make use of image creation and rhetoric in order to convey a positive impression of being skilful and knowledgeable which often does not actually resemble reality (Alvesson, 2004; Bernstein, 1984). Thus, we argue that Nordics Consulting deliberately uses rhetoric and creates and sells an image of themselves, based on the tool-based perspective (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019), that portrays them in a certain light in order to blend in with the client, satisfy market expectations, and secure for a relationship based on trust and respect.

Considering Nordics Consulting's service area is organisational change, they need to meet the rather technical and instrumental market expectations to satisfy their clients. Through adopting methods like the appreciative inquiry, they demonstrate theoretical knowledge in the area of organisational change. As described in the literature review, the appreciative inquiry is a change model that is based on four successive steps that after successful completion promises sustainable change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). At first glance, we find it seems like a regular n-step model according to the planning approach to change. However, taking a closer look at its content, it actually originates in the positive organisational scholarship and thus is far from traditional change management theory (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). In fact, due to promoting thoughts on the joint construction of initiatives, the inclusion of past and future, and dialogue it overlaps much with ideas of the processual perspective on organisational change and dialogic OD. This implies that Nordics Consulting might have another perspective on how to approach organisational change compared to market expectations and other consultancies which normally focus on more technical and planned change theories (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). This would mean that they deliberately adopt such models in order to perform image work.

To investigate this matter, we discuss more detailed how Nordics Consulting perceives organisational change and how they talk about it in connection to underlying theory. We

noticed that one fundamental aspect they attach great value to when talking about organisational change is culture. Like Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016), they understand culture as highly informal, deeply rooted in the organisation and influenced by language. As a result, Nordics Consulting recognises the imperativeness of organisational culture and context concerning change, since they argue that every change project somehow involves and affects culture which is supported by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016). Regarding that, Nordics Consulting attaches significant value to culture in organisational life because it explains organisational meanings and phenomena that affect strategy, control and leadership. This is in line with Palmer, Dunford, and Buchanan (2016) who argue that the process perspective highlights important aspects of organisational change that need to be considered by change agents. These aspects, however, cannot be balanced out by instrumental models that the vast literature on change management provides (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016) since culture is rather neglected in these models but often forms how certain processes are lived within an organisation.

Throughout our interviews Nordics consultants harshly criticised predefined processes or roadmaps for change. Similarly, scholars adopting a processual perspective on change find fault in the technical approach due to oversimplifying change processes by offering models that suggest organisational change can be managed by following a sequence of steps and phases (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). We observed that, against expectations based on common assumptions regarding the consulting industry (Nikolova & Devinney, 2012), Nordics Consulting does not make use of such predefined processes and roadmaps for change. From this one can argue that Nordics Consulting feels that organisational change is complex and interpreted differently across an organisation which is highly in line with the concept of dialogic OD (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Therefore, a fully controllable process cannot be defined beforehand and changes in direction are almost always necessary throughout the change project. We found that instead, Nordics Consulting relies on customisation of a solution in cooperation with the client as is proposed by the process approach to organisational change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016).

Analysing and interpreting our empirical data we noticed that Nordics Consulting always looks for real, underlying problems of the client organisation and tries to work out power relations, as they can have significant influence on organisational change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). By this, they develop a profound understanding of the change project and its

stakeholders. Through Nordics Consulting's focus on language and involving not only managers but all employees affected by the change we argue that they acknowledge that organisational members have different views on a change project and create different discourses around that. Similarly, the critical perspective on organisational change states that organisational actors are driven by their own interests and thus find themselves in a political environment that is influenced by discourses that can either facilitate or hinder change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). This is rooted in the fact that different forms of language can influence the way we interpret and understand organisational change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019).

In contrast to most consultancies, Nordics Consulting focuses less on performance and efficiency in their consulting projects. They emphasise:

*Organisational change takes time. And if you take the time you need, your business performance might go down for two months or even more. But that's okay then. It is just the way it is. (Karl)*

Based on our general impression of Nordics Consulting and this quote, which we use here in order to emphasise this argument, we conclude that they rather accept a decline in their clients' performance if then at least cultural issues are solved or improved as this, in turn, can eventually improve performance and efficiency. This non-performative intent is also discussed by Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2019) in stating that scholars adopting a critical perspective criticise traditional management literature for being only concerned with performance maximisation and efficiency and thereby overlooking other significant issues such as politics and ethics. This perception of organisational change is in stark contrast to the more technical perspective on organisational change which advocates models and methods that promise an increase in performance and efficiency (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016).

Considering their perception and understanding of change as illustrated above, we argue Nordics Consulting, in reality, adopts a combination of a processual and critical perspective on organisational change. In regard to their view on organisational change, we noticed a high alignment throughout Nordics Consulting. This shared understanding and the value they attach to the topic is deeply rooted in their organisation and we were able to see that Nordics consultants strongly identify with those assumptions and beliefs on change. According to

Alvesson (2004), such shared understandings mould organisational culture, which is closely related to organisational identity. While organisational culture can be seen as representing the context as an implicit phenomenon, identity is more directly emphasised and thus rather explicit (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). In line with this, Albert and Whetten (1985) state that common beliefs and values are expressed in organisational identity. Thus, in order to see ourselves as *we*, we take cultural material to tell ““who are we?”” (Alvesson, 2004, p.127). Following, we argue that Nordics Consulting’s true organisational identity is characterised by their sophisticated understanding of organisational culture as well as their processual and critical perspective on change which attaches great importance to inclusiveness, language, and reflection.

In light of the characteristics that constitute Nordics Consulting’s organisational identity and the image, they sell to clients, we detect a misalignment between both concepts. In fact, we argue that image and organisational identity contradict each other since their image draws upon a more tool-based perspective on change while their organisational identity actually revolves around the processual and critical perspective. Consequently, we suggest that Nordics consultants betray themselves with their image. In contrast to our findings, Empson (2004) argues that an image is usually roughly aligned with organisational identity, which in this study is most evidently not the case. Hence, we want to discuss how Nordics Consulting manages to work with an image that contradicts its organisational identity.

## **5.2 Working with a Contradiction between Image and Identity**

Based on our empirical data, we were able to identify one crucial aspect that enables Nordics Consulting to adopt a processual approach to change, although the client may not have requested that. We found that most of their clients seek support from them to improve their work processes or organisational structures in order to increase innovativeness, efficiency or other measurable performance indicators. This is in line with the general perception discussed in the literature review, which describes the consultant as an expert that identifies and solves problems at client organisations (Walsh, 2001). Throughout getting to know each other, Nordics Consulting however, often observes that the lack of innovativeness, efficiency, or performance can often be explained by underlying cultural issues. Clients’ performance

orientation and failure to recognise the significance of culture, however, hinders Nordics Consulting to openly address and discuss their clients' organisational culture since most of them wish for visible and haptic results. That is why Nordics Consulting feels the need to work with a hidden agenda that ought to hide their true identity and keep up the image they convey.

As mentioned in the analysis, we found the term hidden agenda quite astounding since one normally associates something bad and deceitful with it. Marshak (2006) argues that covert processes, which include hidden agendas or organisational politics in organisations pose a great threat to change processes as they can significantly inhibit their success. However, our case paints a rather differentiated picture. Instead of inhibiting change success by selling an image under the pretence of being perceived as skilled experts, Nordics Consulting actually attempts to work with real substance in secret. Hence, we argue that Nordics Consulting fools its client in regard to what they are really working on in workshops and other interventions. By reorganising processes and structures in a certain way they are on a deeper level actually influencing mindsets and thereby culture as suggested by dialogic OD and process approaches (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Thus, Nordics Consulting deliberately creates covert processes that are ambiguous as they can be interpreted and viewed in different ways, which in this case, however, ought to support achieving change objectives thereby contradicting existing literature on ambiguity and secrecy in change processes (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Marshak, 2006).

Considering the above, we argue the aim of Nordics Consulting is to work with more substance and therewith to accomplish real and sustainable change. In contrast to that, Alvesson (2004) implies that consultancies mainly do image work but do not actually work with more substance and seriousness in regard to their service by stating that consultancies occupy themselves more with conveying an image of being experts than actually being that expert. With our case we thus challenge and question literature for generalising management consultancies and arguing they do not go beyond image work and thus do not understand the complexity of change and important aspects, such as culture and complexity, to it (Alvesson, 2004; Clark, 1995; Sturdy, 1997; Werr & Styhre, 2002). Consequently, one could argue that it is rather unproblematic to work with an image that contradicts their true organisational identity as only so Nordics Consulting can work with more substantial and processual ideas on change. However, Alvesson (2004) states that image and organisational identity should be somewhat aligned in order to secure that organisational members communicate the right message to external parties.

In line with this, Hatch and Schultz (2003) express some dangers that may come with discrepancies between how an organisation sees itself and how it is perceived by others which we address later on.

### 5.3 Paradoxes

On the basis of our empirical material, our analysis and our discussion, we have developed an empirical paradox which is supposed to improve the reader's understanding of the interplay between various factors in our study. Below, we briefly explain the figure and outline the relationship between individual parts.

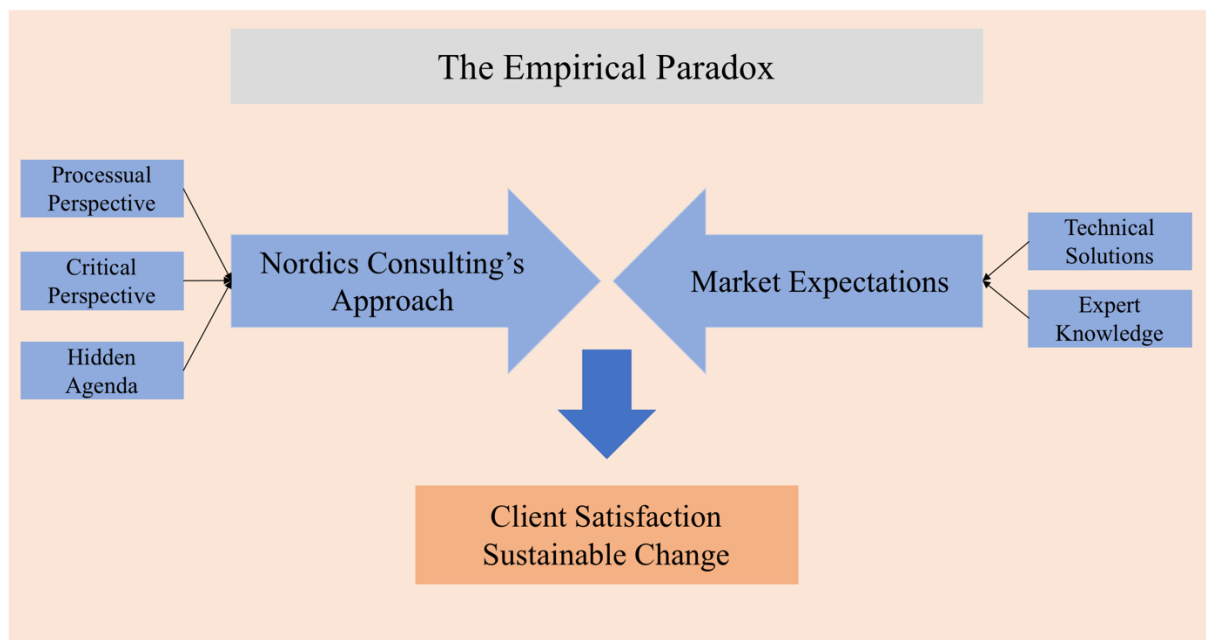
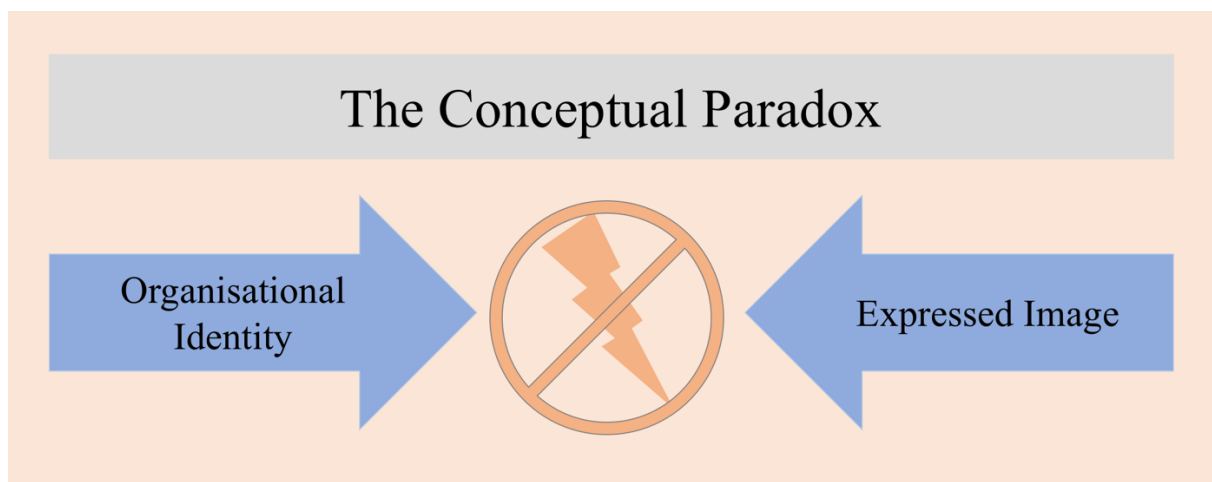


Figure 7: The Empirical Paradox

On the right-hand side of this figure, one can see that market expectations are influenced by the demand of client organisations for technical solutions and expert knowledge of the consultant. On the other side of the figure, one can see what aspects constitute Nordics Consulting's approach to organisational change. This is to a large extent based on their processual and critical perspective on organisational change as well as their application of a hidden agenda during consulting projects which enables them to keep up their image while maintaining their actual perspective on change. Thus, one can argue for a clash between their approach to change, revolving around the processual and critical perspective, and market

expectations, revolving around the tool perspective (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). This clash, however, leads to client satisfaction and sustainable organisational change (Document 5). We base this argument on the fact that internal documents of Nordics Consulting that we were provided with, show that the division of People & Change scores remarkably high in terms of client satisfaction (Document 5). Moreover, Nordics consultants also expressed how happy clients usually are at the end of a project with their service outcomes during interviews and that clients often hire them for follow-up projects. In contrast to that, Alvesson (2004) found that often, clients are rather unsatisfied with the outcome of consultancy projects. Hence, one could argue that Nordics Consulting is, with their approach that contradicts market expectations, more successful in actually achieving sustainable change than other consultancies which might adopt an approach that matches the demands clients have. As we find this quite contradicting, we developed a paradox to illustrate this circumstance.

To lift our empirical findings to a more general and theoretical level, we further developed a conceptual paradox based on our findings to challenge dominant literature. Underneath, we elaborate more in detail on our thoughts on this.



*Figure 8: The Conceptual Paradox*

Researchers argue that a misalignment between the organisational identity and the image expressed to external audiences can be highly critical due to the fact that it might be difficult for organisational members to communicate the right message to clients and thus can negatively affect client relationships and public reputation (Alvesson, 2004; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). While this has, without a doubt, its justification, we offer another perspective on this matter by stating that it also can have positive outcomes.



We base this assumption on our above-mentioned empirical findings which indicate a sustainable change and client satisfaction based on an identity-image-contradiction. With this, we do not argue that a clash between organisational identity and image expressed secures for a sustainable change. Instead, we want to contribute to existing theory on organisational identity and image and challenge the notion that a contradiction between both concepts is by default something negative. Thus, by adopting a different angle and closer look on the two contradicting concepts, one might also be able to paradoxically identify positive effects or results.

## **5.4 Critical Voice**

Revisiting the earlier mentioned notion that a contradiction between organisational identity and image can be critical in organisational contexts, we now discuss the difficulties that come with this. Within dominant literature, it is argued that social identities, which organisational identity is a part of, significantly influence the way people think and act (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Turner, 1984). Connecting this to our case it means that organisational identity should not only influence the way Nordics consultants think but also how they act. Although they expressed thoughts according to their identity during our interviews, they described acting in line with market demands when in contact with clients. Even though in the previous part we pointed out some paradoxical but positive outcomes that emerge from this contradiction, namely sustainable change and client satisfaction, this gap between image and identity is still highly problematic (Alvesson, 2004). The image might at some point be undermined by employees if the discrepancy gets too wide (Alvesson, 2004). This would ultimately lead to an image loss as employees are unable to sell the image credibly to the external audience.

Especially consultancies, being PSFs, are dependent on the public reputation they have since external audiences judge organisations according to the characteristics that their image conveys (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Thus, if clients detect that Nordics Consulting is merely performing image work and does another thing than they actually say, they might judge it for putting on an act. In fact, our interviewees described that clients sometimes get irritated if Nordics consultants try to work with culture when they actually wanted to talk about and work on processes and tasks. This is supported by Hatch and Schultz (2003) who argue that a

misalignment in how an organisation is perceived from various audiences, in this case, external and internal, may very well lead to mistrust, cynicism and confusion. Hence, if clients do not trust or believe in the methods and suggestions proposed by Nordics Consulting, then this may lead to resistance, which can be either active or passive. While passive resistance might be acceptable, active resistance can severely slow down the change process and hinder further initiatives and therefore, a sustainable change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016).

Consulting projects often can be spread over a long period of time, including many and long hours at the client on-site (Alvesson, 2004). In fact, consultants often spend more time at the client's office than in their own organisation, which is also the case for Nordics Consulting. In order to hide their true identity, Nordics Consulting expresses its technical image, which contradicts their identity. We thus argue that considering the large amount of time spent at the client's site, they become less and less confronted with their own organisational identity and thus might forget or get confused about what their actual identity is due to also somehow identifying with the client over time. This notion is supported by Alvesson (2004) who states that due to long-term relationships between client and consultant, which can be quite close and complex, it is not unusual for consultants to identify with the client organisation. For Nordics Consulting, it is, therefore, a risk that they start to believe in and identify more with the image than their actual organisational identity. This could further lead to questioning their identity-based approach to change and ceasing to work with it, which is supported by Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994). The researchers argue that if organisational members change their perception or evaluation of the organisational identity, they will also act and behave differently. This bears the risk of functional stupidity as Nordics consultants would stop reflecting critically upon organisational dynamics (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016) at the client organisation when forgetting their true identity and adapting more and more to their image.

The lack of identifying with beliefs and values of the organisation may also internally lead to distrust, confusion and cynicism (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). At Nordics Consulting, we observed this identity struggle with two consultants who expressed their doubts about the exclusively soft and processual perspective on change that is otherwise shared and agreed upon throughout the organisation. In contrast to their colleagues, the two consultants stated that some hard measures would as well benefit the change processes. Their choice of words ("Fool around in workshops for a year" or "Coaching only is kind of limp") and tone of voice expressed the irony and sarcasm that the soft perspective generates at times. These internal problems can

affect how Nordics consultants behave and how they express themselves in front of clients and in turn affect their image negatively as suggested by Alvesson (2004). Further, it indicates a form of disengagement with Nordics Consulting's organisational identity, as described by Fleming and Spicer (2003) in their theory of resistance as escape which can be expressed through cynicism, irony, and dis-identification.

Concluding, one can say that Nordics Consulting might think it is unproblematic to work with an image that contradicts their identity due to thereby being able to work towards real and sustained change. We, however, argue that it can be risky and challenging to keep up the charade due to the effects that always talking about something you do not believe in might have ultimately on your true identity. In this sense, organisational identity is also related to the individual level. A stabilised and coherent individual identity has a positive influence on mental well-being (Alvesson, 2004). Thus, if individuals doubt their own identity or are confused about it, then this can easily lead to uncertainty, anxiety and a decrease in self-esteem (Alvesson, 2004). We, therefore, argue that Nordics Consulting should critically evaluate the effects that their image work has on client relations and on their own employees. Internally, Nordics Consulting should secure for continuous sense-giving concerning their organisational identity and common assumptions and beliefs as is proposed by dominant literature in relation to identity work and sense-making (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand how a contrast between the image and the organisational identity of a consultancy can facilitate a sustainable change and from that to illustrate implications that follow for theory. Our main findings provided us with insights on Nordics Consulting's true organisational identity, which is characterised by a sophisticated understanding of culture as they recognise its informality and language as an influencing element. Further, we found that their understanding of organisational change revolves around the processual and critical perspective as they place a high value on organisational context, language and power relations. In their approach to facilitating organisational change, they, therefore, focus on high inclusiveness and participation among all client members affected by

the change, reflexivity, and customisation of each change initiative. We argue these values and assumptions Nordics Consulting shares are deeply rooted in its culture and thus highly influence its organisational identity. However, throughout our research, we found that the image they deliberately portray to clients is rather differentiated from their identity. In order to adapt to market expectations, Nordics consultants create and sell an image of themselves that leads clients to the belief the consultants were rather toolbox-oriented and had a technical approach to change. Thus, we argue Nordics Consulting's true identity contradicts the image they convey to clients and thereby, they betray themselves.

In order to answer our guiding question about how they facilitate a sustainable change in spite of this contradiction we analysed and discussed their approach more in detail. We found Nordics consultants tend to occupy and blend clients with tools that seem rather useful and functional to clients as they superficially have an impact on processes or structure. However, on a deeper level, the work around those aspects actually trigger a talk about culture, reflection on it and thus mindset alterations which facilitate a sustainable change. We argue that in order to work with that hidden agenda, Nordics consultants depend on the image they create to ensure that clients do not detect or get confused about their actual work.

Throughout our analysis, we found and developed an empirical paradox that describes and summarises our main findings. We find it contradicting that a consultancy that has an approach that is in stark contrast to market expectations and what clients demand is able to successfully facilitate a real and sustainable change. It further seems as if Nordics Consulting was even more successful regarding change outcome compared to other consultancies, due to high client satisfaction at Nordics Consulting (Document 5) and the fact that dominant literature implies dissatisfaction of clients concerning consultancy work (Alvesson, 2004).

Even though Nordics Consulting's approach seems to be successful, considering that client satisfaction is remarkably high, we found some critical aspects to it. One rather obvious risk is that clients might detect their image work and thus get confused about what Nordics Consulting actually stands for. This uncertainty could then quickly lead to mistrust and resistance expressed in cynicism or sarcasm and hindering the change process from progressing. Another risk the contradiction between image and identity bears is a rather internal threat for Nordics Consulting. Over time, Nordics consultants may start to believe more in their image than in their identity and thus adapt their approach according to their image as they dis-identify with

their organisational identity. Not only can this distancing from the identity lead to cynicism or irony, but it could also lead to functional stupidity due to working with less substance and reflexivity. Individual identity struggles can further lead to anxiety or lower self-esteem.

## **6.1 Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications**

At this point, we want to refer back to our conceptual paradox which we developed on the basis of our empirical findings at Nordics Consulting. In that, we argue that a contradiction between an image and organisational identity as well as a hidden agenda can actually have positive outcomes. We do not argue that it secures for sustainable change, rather we intend to challenge the notion in dominant literature that a wide gap between both concepts and covert processes *per se* lead to negative effects (Alvesson, 2004; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Marshak, 2006). We thus offer a different perspective to the interrelation between image and identity and Marshak's (2006) theory on covert processes hindering successful organisational change.

In relation to this stands our second theoretical contribution, which aims at challenging dominant literature in regard to consultancy work. Here, the general perception is that consultancies and practitioners in general mainly do image and impression management, lack reflection, and/or do not understand the complexity of organisations and change and the importance of culture and context to it (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Clark, 1995; Sturdy, 1997; Werr & Styhre, 2002). However, with our case company, we found a consultancy that actually goes beyond impression management and image work in order to work with more substance and reflection, and thus achieves real sustainable organisational change. We do not mean to refute existing theory, but merely question the generalisability of consultancy work theory.

In order to provide the reader with some implications that follow for practitioners, we argue that organisations such as consultancies and other PSFs should critically reflect upon their image work and focus on providing its consultants continuously with meaning and sense for their work and identity. Even though our study does not primarily focus on the topic of organisational change, it provides practitioners with implications on how to adopt a processual and critical perspective to change in practice. Especially the process approach is in critique by

scholars due to its vagueness as it does not provide concrete advice on how to implement it in practice (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). From our empirical findings, we conclude that in order to truthfully take on a processual and/or critical perspective on change one first needs to develop a profound and comprehensive understanding of organisational culture and its context. Nordics Consulting provided us with some concrete advice on how to become aware of organisational culture at clients. Here, they emphasise a focus on language while observing client members in conversations and workshops regarding their behaviour and discourse around change. Further, re-enacting of situations can be helpful to critically reflect upon organisational circumstances and find out reasons behind reasons and what may follow from these. We find these examples can be useful for consultants in order to become aware of client's culture and followingly to adapt their interventions and methods to the contextual and cultural circumstances which enable more substantial work around organisational change.

## **6.2 Further Research**

The concept of identity in regard to consulting firms is of particular interest to study, as a consultant's organisational identity is said to coexist alongside different professional identities – the ones created during projects with the client (Alvesson & Empson, 2008). A dominant part of this literature is focused on consultants as such (Alvesson, Kärreman, Sturdy & Handley, 2009), while Alvesson and Sveningsson (2011) claim that both, the perspective of the consultant and the client is needed to gain a holistic picture. This is rooted in the fact that a consultant's self-perception is to a great extent, contingent on the client's opinion (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Our study, however, was only based on the perspective of Nordics consultants, as we were not able to interview Nordics Consulting's clients. Thus, it would be particularly interesting to study the view of consultants and of clients in connection to secure for more substance in findings and to gain an overall picture. Further, we argue a long-term study observing Nordics Consulting would shed some more light on the identity-image-contradiction, how it develops over time and if it has a negative impact on their organisational identity as well as values and understandings over time.

### **6.3 Concluding Remarks**

It is quite contradictory and paradoxical that a clash between how you perceive yourself and how you sell yourself to the outer world can create something good. When thinking about image work and people pretending to be someone they are not, that are the opposite of what they sell, we usually tend to associate bad people with bad intentions to it. And quite frankly, this might not be so surprising considering that nowadays when we open the newspapers, we mainly read about bad news. In spite of that, we feel the need as researchers to reflect upon this and provide readers with good news for a change. There are good people with good intentions, but the fact that they feel the need to dissemble themselves in order to accomplish something good for others should give us all something to think about.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A – Overview of Empirical Material

#### *Selected Documents Reviewed*

<b>Document</b>	<b>Document Name</b>	<b>Document Type</b>
1	Implementation Paradigm – Professionalising Transformation at Nordics Consulting	PowerPoint
2	Offer Process Optimisation	Word
3	Nordics Consulting – About us	PowerPoint
4	Nordics Consulting – Our History	PDF
5	Client Satisfaction Survey Evaluation 2018	Excel
6	Nordics Consulting – Our Service	PDF

## **Declaration of Authorship**

We hereby affirm that we have independently composed this paper and that we have not used any other resources than the ones indicated. Any parts extracted from other papers, books, or articles as a quote or analogously have been indicated by the specification of the source. This paper has not been presented to another examination office in this or a similar form. Further we declare that all interviews have been transcribed and are available upon request.

Antonia Ruppe & Luisa Schunk

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Lund, 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2019