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Employees' perceptions of planned change communication during top-down initiated organisational changes

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Abstract

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Continuous organisational changes worldwide have led to a considerable amount of research on this topic within various fields. Managers have generally been acknowledged as the most crucial stakeholders in organisational changes, leading to a majority of studies being from their perspective. This has led to an unbalanced view on organisational changes. This study therefore aims to explore the employees' aspects during change processes. More specifically, the study focuses on planned change communication during a top-down initiated change process, how employees perceive their role during change processes and how they are able to voice their opinions and thoughts during change processes. The empirical material was collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 employees from a municipality in Sweden. The interviews were conducted from a social constructionist perspective, and analysis of the findings resulted in various conclusions. Despite the discussion in recent literature on how employees should be seen as participants in change processes rather than recipients of continuous changes, they seem to some degree perceive themselves as recipients. Moreover, the findings from the analysis suggest that only a positive employee voice is noted by their managers. This study contributes to research and practice with the understudied employee perspective in organisational changes, as well as by providing insights into the importance of employee voice.

Keywords: organisational change, employee communication, internal communication, sensemaking, employee voice.

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1. Introduction

In our globalised society, organisations are faced with the need to constantly adjust to rapidly developing external conditions. Firms merge, technology develops, employees retire, natural disasters occur and scandals surface. These events result in a large number of changes, planned and unplanned, in order to keep up with the internal and external environment. Planned changes refer to adjustments in structures or processes, and are usually determined by managers (Lewis, 2014). These include mergers, material changes, such as new office equipment, or as is the case for this study, a political decision that a new department will open in the organisation in question. Unplanned changes can be the result of an improvement project or an innovation idea that grows and develops over time (Lewis, 2011).

Due to the regularity of organisational changes, the issue has been a research topic from various perspectives, one of them being strategic communication (Lewis, 2011). Strategic communication as a research field studies organisational communication (Verhoeven, Zerfass & Tench, 2011) and has been defined as an organisation's intentional and purposeful use of communication to achieve its long-term goals and objectives (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007). The notion of its purposeful use to achieve organisational goals as the key factor of strategic communication makes the field an integral part of organisational changes. Strategic communication is therefore the way in which stakeholders look at organisational processes from a communicative perspective. Change communication is then considered an important element in how employees socially experience the change process and is a means in how employees define, support (or resist) and evaluate the change initiative (Lewis, 2014). Employees spread opinions and attitudes towards change through their communication, which is why it is often held accountable for unsuccessful change implementation (Lewis, 2011).

Much of the scholarly attention is towards failed changes, why they fail, who is to blame and how to overcome the obstacles for a successful change. Presumably, the reason for this focus is that a majority of changes are not considered successful (Burnes, 2011; Lewis, 2011) - although the definition of a 'successful' change can vary for different stakeholders. In the case of some planned change implementations, failure rate can be as high as 75% (Lewis

& Seibold, 1998). Various explanations for the failures have been proposed such as issues related to managers' behaviour and communication, the participation processes, general communication and expectations and vision (Lewis, 2011).

The problem here is that the change process is generally viewed as a top-down process that is planned and executed by managers of the change. The target audience in research on this topic are therefore generally managers (Balogun, 2006; Lewis, 2014). Employees are seen as 'change recipients', a resistant group that managers need to deal with and convince that the change is beneficial (Simonsson & Heide, 2020). This prevailing and conventional approach therefore explores organisational changes from managers' point of view. However, recent development in the literature advocates increasing the importance of the employees' roles during organisational changes (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Heide & Simonsson, 2011). It is normally *their* everyday work that is most affected by organisational changes and they are the ones who actually implement the change initiative, through their communication (Armenakis & Harris, 2009).

If employees are considered the building blocks of every organisation, their attitudes, strategies and intersubjective interactions with each other are a key factor for change implementation (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). The negative image of employees' negativity towards changes should be disputed and they should rather be seen as a vital resource that can affect the results of a change process.

The contradiction then is that at the same time as employees are claimed to be the crucial group of stakeholders during organisational changes, the managers are the main research focus (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Simonsson & Heide, 2020). Therefore, the current approach has developed into exploring the employees' perspective. Employees develop their own sense of the change, which can deviate from that of their managers and can affect the change outcome (Tourish & Robson, 2006). A wider perspective of organisational changes, where employees' communicative actions are in focus, would provide a better understanding of the potential factors that influence the outcome of change processes. Further, this would go beyond the one-sided manager approach and would add plurality to the study of change, which provides knowledge that can create viable change implementations and therefore viable organisations (Bryant, 2006).

The purpose of this study is thus to generate knowledge on strategic change communication from the employees' perspective, during planned top-down initiated change. I have,

with the help of previous research, chosen to direct my attention towards certain key concepts and focus areas, such as employee voice and participation, listening and resistance, concepts that are widely acknowledged and have been extensively studied in recent research on organisational change. By doing so, I believe it is possible to contribute to research on organisational change and change communication within the field of strategic communication. The research questions that I seek to answer are the following:

RQ1: How do employees perceive their communicative role during planned top-down changes?

RQ2: How do employees voice their opinions towards planned top-down change initiatives and how is the employee voice met by management in a planned top-down change?

I will answer these research questions and aim to achieve the investigation's goal through an inquiry and analysis of a change in an organisation chosen for study. The empirical material was gathered through interviews with 15 employees at a municipality in Sweden, where a planned top-down change was currently in process. The municipality plans to open a contact centre later this year (2020) and it will affect the citizens of the city as well as the employees. The aim of the contact centre is to simplify the citizens' possibilities of contacting the municipality and to decrease the employees' workload. This change was a political decision: all departments of the municipality are involved in the contact centre. Some employees will be repositioned, and new employees have been hired to work at the contact centre. This was considered a highly relevant case for my study as I was able to interview employees to gain knowledge on the previously mentioned concepts from the employees' perspective.

1.1 Delimitations

As this study aims to explore various concepts and theories regarding organisational changes from the employees' perspective, only their perspective will be studied. This means that the interviewees only consist of employees who do not have a managing-position within the mu-

nicipality. Thereby, the study may not generate a fully representative image of the change process, as the managers' perspective is not present in this study.

1.2 Disposition

The thesis is structured in the following way. A literature review presents and discusses previous research within the field of planned organisational changes. This is done in order to put the study in relevance to earlier research and to show how it can contribute with a new research perspective; the employees' perspective. Thereafter are theoretical presuppositions that form the foundation for this study. Here, theories and concepts such as sensemaking, employee voice, resistance, listening and power will be raised. Next is a methodological section that explains the epistemological viewpoint for the study, the case organisation and research design. The analysis thereafter presents the findings from the interviews, followed by a discussion on these findings and the study's contribution to the field of strategic communication. Lastly, the thesis concludes with recommendations for future research.

2. Research on change communication: two major perspectives

This section describes and critically discusses research and literature on organisational changes. A specific spotlight will be on two major perspectives within change communication: the episodic and the emergent perspective. The review will showcase the need for further research on organisational changes within the field of strategic communication from the employees' perspective.

2.1 Internal communication during episodic and emergent organisational changes

Research on organisational changes has generally studied the topic from either one of two main approaches: the episodic approach and the emergent approach. Classic models of organisational changes view changes as a linear process that has a beginning and an end (Lewis, 2014). These models represent episodic changes that managers generally identify the need for. An episodic change is assumed to be initiated when a problem is perceived and ends with an implementation where the change is brought to use. Kurt Lewin's three step model of change is a popular example of such a linear model (Lewin, 1947). The same can be said about Kotter's eight step change model that he developed based on Lewin's model (Kotter & Rathgeber, 2006). Lewin (1947) suggested that an organisational change happens in three stages: unfreezing, changing and refreezing. These, and other classic models of change, imply that organisational changes go through one stage at a time and that after the last step - implementation - the project is finished. From this perspective, organisations are seen as fixed entities and changes are temporary events that disrupt the organisations' routines, until they implement a change and become stable again (Sonenshein, 2010).

The problem with the classical models, and the critique they have met, is towards the fact that they simplify a process that is in fact greatly complex, and much less rational than

can be assumed from presentations of the linear models (Zerfass & Huck, 2007). They have therefore received a substantial critique for painting an unrealistic picture of organisational changes. On the contrary to what the linear models suggest, changes include undefined phases that intertwine with each other and are usually altered as they undergo amendments due to stakeholders' interpretation and reactions to the change. Lewin's model, however, neither takes into consideration that an episodic change can in fact gradually change or transform during the change process, nor that the goal can change along the way. As these models suggest that a change process is linear, they provide managers with the notion that changes are a straightforward process that managers can control (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014).

From the episodic perspective of organisational changes, communication is simplified and plays only a minor role (Zerfass & Huck, 2007). The crucial relationship between communication and organisations (that organisations are produced and reproduced by the means of communication) is therefore seldom discussed within this approach (Johansson & Heide, 2008). Communication is rather used as a tool to explain the change and generally focuses on "what, when, who and how" (Johansson & Heide, 2008, p. 292). The assumption from Coch and French's (1948) study for example was that if employees receive enough information about the beneficial reasons for the change, they will accept and support the change initiative (Coch & French, 1948). Popular press books therefore emphasise the importance of 'good' internal communication during changes (Lewis, Schmisser, Stephens & Weir, 2006). Lewis et al.'s (2006) review of best-selling books on change management concluded that the majority of the books emphasised the importance of participation, i.e. to include the employees, dissemination and openness of information about the change and communication of the purpose of the change. If these actions are taken during change implementation, the organisation will achieve managers' desired outcome of the change (Lewis et al., 2006).

What is lacking in these books and research is first of all to specify what is good or effective communication and secondly to provide concrete and practical advice (Lewis et al., 2006). Furthermore, research has shown that although participation is emphasised in the literature, participative communication is underused in practice (Lewis, 1999). Lewis' study found that managers placed more emphasis on disseminating information to their employees, rather than seeking input from them. Moreover, participative approaches and soliciting input seem to be used only in order to try to reduce their seemingly resistant attitudes towards the change (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Russ, 2012).

Research from an episodic approach has then generally focused on the managers' important role during changes to inform the employees of what is going on (Piderit, 2000; Zorn, Page & Cheney, 2000). Within this approach, the aim is therefore to convince the employees of the importance of the change. Even the extreme view has been proposed that all reactions besides an enthusiastic appraisal of the change initiative are perceived as resistance (Zorn et al., 2000). Resistance has received particular attention in the episodic approach. A frequent assumption is that with efficient communication managers can overcome resistance and coerce the employees into being more supportive of a change (Sillince, 1999). However, some research argues for resistance being one form of valuable dissent (Piderit, 2000). Recent studies on dissent have furthermore suggested that it is a form of sensemaking, rather than a sign of resistance (Lewis, 2014). The mainly managerial research perspective precludes any assumptions on how the employees themselves experience the change and explain their reactions and attitudes (Balogun & Johnson, 2005).

While the classical models can be a helpful planning-tool during changes, it is important to remember that change processes are much more complex than the models imply. Alternative models on organisational changes therefore argue for an emergent approach towards organisational changes that in fact take place within communication (Ford & Ford, 1995). The emergent approach emphasises the stakeholders' part in changes. Sonenshein (2010) argues that what is lacking in the classical models is the fact that the organisational stakeholders affect the change process and its outcome. An emergent approach towards organisational changes provides the perspective that changes constantly shift over time when employees interact and influence each other's perspectives and opinions (Ford & Ford, 1995). A change emerges by the means of the employees' communication and the organisation is not seen as a static entity. Rather, an organisation is enacted through its stakeholders' communication. Their intersubjective sensemaking processes then shape their perception of a change (Weick, 1995). Weick and Quinn's argument for using the concept "changing" rather than "change" becomes relevant in this context (Weick & Quinn, 1999; p. 382). Using their conceptualisation, they argued for the fact that changes never stop and that organisations are continuously changing, rather than existing in episodes (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

As mentioned, from the emergent approach changes are perceived to take place within communication (Ford & Ford, 1995). By means of employees' interpretations and sensemaking processes they will affect their social reality and thus the outcome of a change. The focus from this perspective is on communication as a means for creating an understanding and al-

lowing for sensemaking. Changes are seen as events that bring about new social realities for the organisation dependent on the situation (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). From the emergent perspective Ford, Ford and McNamara (2002) developed the idea of socially constructed background conversations. The authors' fundamental idea is that communication should not be perceived only as a tool during organisational change to announce a change, preparing people for the effects of the change, or reducing confusion. Rather, organisational changes occur *within* communication and we have different background conversations that are dependent on our previous experience within the organisation (Ford et al., 2002). The authors therefore advise against seeing resistance, and other seemingly negative reactions from employees during changes, as a psychological attribute within the individual and argue that it is more relevant to look at it as a socially constructed conversation (Ford & Ford, 1995; Ford et al., 2002).

As mentioned in the introduction, research on planned change communication has mainly focused on the managerial perspective (Bryant, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Piderit, 2000). One of the few studies that focus on the employees' perspective and how the employees perceive resistance during organisational changes is Lewis' (2006) study on implementation communication (Lewis, 2006). There she claims that employees do not necessarily have the same perception of resistance as their managers. In fact, employees do not have the same perception of a successful change process as their managers (Lewis, 2006). The results of Lewis' study showed that employees want more space for voicing their opinions in change initiatives than their managers or change agents allocate to them (Lewis, 2006). Her results are in line with other studies on the same topic, suggesting that employees are not given the opportunity or arenas to voice their opinion, ideas or suggestions, which is why their perspective is lacking in the research field of change communication (Deetz, 1995; Lewis, 2006; Morrison, 2011; Piderit, 2000).

The importance of the employees' perspective is further argued for by Sonenshein (2010), where he emphasises their role in shaping a change implementation. If employees' sensemaking process is accounted for, it provides a more dynamic knowledge of meaning during changes. This knowledge can lead to an improved understanding of employee reactions towards changes, understanding that is critical for a change implementation. Furthermore, with studies from their perspective, it can be observed how their meaning changes over time, which can impact the implementation of a change process (Sonenshein, 2010).

2.2 Summary reflections

This review of literature has explored research on organisational changes with a specific focus on planned change communication. Two main research approaches towards organisational changes were described, and the function that communication is seen to have within each approach was discussed. This study is conducted from a social constructionist perspective. As such, the fundamental approach towards communication during organisational changes should be the emergent approach. The most vivid conclusion of the review is that research from the employees' perspective is lacking and that employees are still seen as recipients of change. The review also provides insights into a few challenges for the field of planned change communication. The first challenge is to question the concepts of focus in the episodic approach. A concept such as resistance to change needs to be clarified in order to know what it signifies. The existing management bias in research stipulates a one-sided perspective on this concept, leading to the second challenge for the field; filling the research gap with studies from employees' perspective. As changes are ultimately implemented by employees, an understanding of their perception of the planned communication could provide valuable insight into change processes and affect organisations' prosperity.

3. Theoretical presuppositions

This section presents theories and concepts which are of primary interest for this study's framework. The sensemaking theory and concepts such as background conversations, power and employee voice will therefore be described and explained as that will be used as a main theoretical foundation for the analysis.

3.1 Sensemaking during planned change initiatives

It goes without saying that the process of sensemaking is to make something sensible (Weick, 1995). More precisely, sensemaking is a social process where we construct plausible interpretations from unclear and discrepant cues in our environment that interrupt our ongoing activities, in order to rationalise what we are doing (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). The researcher within organisational theories that is the most associated with the concept is Karl E. Weick. The basic idea of Weick's sensemaking theory is that the process is an ongoing and social creation of reality that we construct when we make retrospective sense of the situation we had found ourselves in (Weick, 1993, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Besides being an ongoing, social and retrospective process, an additional key characteristic of the process is that it is driven by presumed plausibility rather than precise accuracy (Weick, 1995). This means that our interpretations are not necessarily correct. Instead, they are reasonings that provide sufficient presumed understanding and assumed knowledge for us to feel sufficiently certain during times of uncertainty (Weick, 1995).

Studies have suggested that different groups, such as employees in different organisational positions, can interpret the same events differently (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Managers and employees thus generally experience and make sense of the same change in a different way. Another essential element for our sensemaking process is emotion (Weick, 1995). Emotions shape the meaning that we make of a new event and lead us to reframe the situation and to create a new interpretation of the environment (Sonenshein, 2009). Accordingly, a negative emotional frame makes us notice negative cues in the environment which can give

rise to a critical sensemaking process (George & Jones, 2001). It is this critical sensemaking process that provides managers with valuable input from employees on the change initiative. However, in order to use the valuable input, it requests that managers notice and attend to their employees' emotions instead of disregarding them and labelling the employees as 'resistors' (Sonenshein, 2009). This strengthens the argument that it is important to scrutinise the employees' perspective during organisational changes (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Organisational sensemaking is generally initiated during situations that involve a confusing ambiguity (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). More specifically, it is triggered by events that interrupt employees' ongoing activities, pressuring them to make some sense of the activity. A practical example of interrupting events is when managers announce their decisions to implement a change initiative, and employees ask themselves questions such as "what does this mean for me?" and "will I keep my job?" (Sonenshein, 2009; p. 231). The managers' decisions thus serve as a starting point for employees' sensemaking process.

The unexpected organisational events often set off two occasions for sensemaking that affect cognitive activity: ambiguity and uncertainty, which can then lead to disorientation (Weick, 1995). In the case of ambiguity, there is too much information available which leads to too many interpretations of the information and employees engage in dialogues where they can make sense about this information together. When employees experience uncertainty, on the other hand, it is because of the lack of information, leading to employees' lack of knowledge on the event (Weick, 1995). Uncertainty therefore arises when employees are unsure of how their environment is changing or of the impact of the changes. Sensemaking thus allows them to handle this uncertainty by creating a rational understanding of our environment (Maitlis, 2005).

The sensemaking process takes place in interactive talk, when we turn unexpected events into words to re-enact our environment (Weick et al., 2005). This is why communication is an essential element of the process. This conversational process that sensemaking is, involves various communicative forms, spoken and written, formal and informal. It occurs when we chat, gossip, negotiate, exchange stories, exchange rumours or past experiences or when we seek information (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). It is the employees' attempt to create a common understanding during uncertain situations. Since our sensemaking process is based on the understanding from the individuals around us, it is related to the idea of background conversations that will be discussed further in the following section (Ford, Ford & McNamara, 2002). Hence, it is argued that planned changes happen through shifts in interpersonal

conversations that employees engage in during their sensemaking process (Ford & Ford, 1995).

Five categories of events have been suggested as to setting off organisational sense-making: major planned events, major unplanned events, minor planned events, minor unplanned events and hybrids of major/minor planned/unplanned events (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). An example of major planned events is a planned strategic change initiative. This is the type of event that is the most notable in sensemaking studies within the field of organisational strategies and changes (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). Planned strategic change initiatives usually entail an interrupted way of performing one's job. Employees are 'forced' into sensemaking processes due to the change, in order to make sense of the new way of working (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). During this social sensemaking process, employees are influenced by the constructed realities created by those around them. Employees thus create knowledge that can be used to affect changes based on the way in which they create a common understanding of the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). The sensemaking process is therefore considered to be critical for the outcome of a planned organisational change (Weick et al., 2005).

3.2 Background conversations

The theory of background conversations (Ford et al., 2002) was developed as a response to the idea that resistance is a psychological factor. From the psychological perspective, it is generally the aim to overcome the employees' resistance. This idea, however, has been challenged and Dent and Goldberg (1999) suggest that people do not resist the change itself, but rather resist the unknown, loss of pay or having to accept management's change-ideas that are not suitable from the employees' point of view. The authors further argue that "the belief in inherent resistance to change is the fundamental flaw of these change efforts" (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; p. 27). Moreover, it has been proposed that instead of trying to change the employees' attitudes towards the change and their seemingly resistant opinions, the real need may be to alter the way a change is implemented (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Ford et al. (2002) argued that by seeing resistance as something 'within' an individual, socially constructed resistance is ignored. The authors' fundamental idea is to acknowledge communication as the medium within which changes take place, instead of looking at it as a

tool to announce a change, to prepare people for the effects of the change or to reduce confusion (Ford & Ford, 1995). Their approach is therefore in line with the emergent approach, discussed in the literature review. When a new change is implemented, it constructs a new reality through communication.

Looking at organisational change from this perspective means that change is driven by communication itself, rather than the idea that change uses communication as a tool in the process. Here, conversations include not only what is spoken, but even symbols, artefacts, theatrics, facial expressions and other gestures that are used as substitutes for what is spoken (Ford et al., 2002). Dissimilar backgrounds give different conversations and behaviours (Ford et al., 2002). The authors therefore name this phenomenon “background conversations” (p. 108), because these are conversations that form the background experience we bring with us to a new experience (Ford et al., 2002). Our organisational experiences provide us with different backgrounds, contexts and framing of a change initiative. If the organisational background conversation is cynical during organisational changes, it creates a cynical reality for the employees, which, in turn, gives rise to cynical resistance, and employees project it overtly and less visibly, by for example complaining and gossiping (Ford et al., 2002). In order to change a cynical background conversation, and therefore change a cynical resistance, there is a need to shift the focus of the conversations (Ford et al., 2002).

To change background conversations, they need to be brought into the foreground. This is where dialogues between employees and managers is the key. Through dialogue and discussions, employees and managers are able to explore their own underlying assumptions or expectations, reflect on their past conversations and strive to resolve misunderstandings. With an open dialogue, background conversations can be brought to the consciousness, which is necessary in order to be able to examine and understand them. This enables shifting the content of conversations, which then allows for a reframing of the constructed reality to think in new ways and to create new conversations and context, instead of simply trying to change present practice (Ford et al., 2002). Resistance is then no longer something that managers must overcome with various resistance reduction strategies. Resistance is a conversation that can be reframed with communication, because it is a public phenomenon that appears in people’s conversations and interactions (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

3.3 Employee voice and power in organisational changes

This section will discuss the concepts of employee voice and power dimensions during organisational changes, as well as organisational listening. The concepts have been acknowledged to be related to the possible employee participation and involvement in organisational changes and are therefore considered relevant for this study.

3.3.1 Employee voice

Employee voice is a form of feedback and it refers to employees' upward expressions of ideas, concerns or opinions on work-related matters. A related concept to employee voice is critical upwards communication (Morrison, 2014; Tourish & Robson, 2006). It is thus not merely an element of internal communication but a potential change enabler. The opposite of an employee voice is silence, which refers to not speaking up when one has a suggestion or information that can be useful for a potential organisational problem. (Morrison, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). While the intent is constructive, voice generally challenges and seeks to change the current situation. As such, it can be argued that voice is what managers perceive as resistance (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

Just as it can be argued that eliminating perceived employees' resistance can deprive an organisation of useful information, so can withholding voice. Employee voice can have significant organisational benefits, such as learning, error correction and crisis prevention (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Furthermore, voice can be beneficial for employees, giving them a sense of control and the feeling that they are valued (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). The paradox here is that even if studies suggest that managers say they have a preference for involvement and open communication, feedback in practice is generally from managing- to non-managing employees (Luthans & Larsen, 1986). In addition, if upward voice and feedback takes place, it tends to be positive rather than critical. Intentionally or not, managers tend to create systems that hinder what they regard as negative feedback being brought to their attention (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

Managers can thus engender a "climate of silence" (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; p. 708). When the climate is such, employees have the shared assumption that speaking up about issues is useless, which they respond to with silence. Employees in this situation feel insecure speaking up about problems or suggesting improvements, saying it is hopeless or even dangerous (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). This entails that managers largely receive only positive

feedback and create a twisted understanding of the communication climate and an “over-optimism” of the organisational reality (Tourish & Robson, 2006; p. 715). Although the intentions are good, the managers’ crooked perception may lead to inappropriate decisions and unexpected negative consequences. This can be an extensive barrier to change initiatives as it prevents variance in input that is available to managers. Furthermore, it is likely to hinder the organisation from being pluralistic (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). A pluralistic organisation is one that values differences among employees and allows for their perspectives and opinions being expressed (Harquail & Cos, 1993, referred to in Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Organisational silence can therefore be the result of managers’ avoidance of negative feedback and implies a set of implicit beliefs often held by managers, such that they know best about issues of organisational importance.

A concept that runs in tandem with employee voice, but has received much less attention in research, is listening, or more specifically, organisational listening (MacNamara, 2016). Listening has been explained as the act of directing one’s attention towards vital information and input in order to enable learning and ensuring self-critical analysis (Lewis, 2020). Communication in the form of a two-way dialogue should involve speaking and listening. This includes, amongst others, acknowledging and considering others’ expressions of voice and responding in an appropriate way (MacNamara, 2015). However, communication is generally more associated with speaking and the listening part is left behind. Moreover, some managers choose to listen to a narrow group of employees and ignore others (MacNamara, 2015). Managers then focus on speaking and informing and engage in listening more as a courtesy to others. However, the strategic value of listening is considerable, and organisations are encouraged to use active and purposeful internal listening for the organisation’s long-term learning and success (MacNamara, 2016). Lack of it has been linked to reduced employee motivation and participation and increased employee turnover (MacNamara, 2018).

If organisational listening is present, it needs to be genuine and ‘real’ in order to be useful. A manager that shows fake listening and provides channels for stakeholders to voice their opinions without the ability of them influencing the decision-making process, is likely to be perceived as insincere (MacNamara, 2016). Merely listening to check the ‘listening box’ out of respect is not sufficient. Managers that fail to listen to feedback or warnings generally do so due to the magnitude of the problem that is being brought to their attention. They feel overwhelmed by the scope of the problems and refuse to consider the warnings. At its extreme, lack of listening can have catastrophic consequences (Lewis, 2020; MacNamara,

2018). Although the opening of a contact centre is unlikely to have such consequences, it is still important that employees perceive that their managers listen to their input - and that they really do listen and not only appear to do so. Employees' expectations on listening have increased in contemporary organisations, in parallel with the increased emphasis on their role as organisational ambassadors, and they expect to be heard (Lewis, 2020). They have access to information and experience that the managers do not have, and they expect to be able to present their unique perspective, needs and expectations to managers.

3.3.2 The communicative dimensions of power

As mentioned in the discussion of sensemaking, different groups construct stories independently of each other. It is therefore expected that managing groups construct a reality that differs from those constructed by non-managerial groups. This affects the perception of the organisational climate as a whole (Morrison, 2014). Moreover, having different perceptions of the constructed organisational reality, members are prone to assume that their view is more common than it is, and is therefore the 'correct' one. The problem is that since people are sensitive to negative commentaries, any difference of opinion is generally viewed as resistance that needs to be overcome, rather than as valuable feedback (Bryant, 2006).

This is where power dimensions become tangible. Power is a primary element in organisations and is the result of how members frame the dominant interpretations of occurring situations in the organisation (Mumby, 2001). Power relations exist on the surface and in deeper structures and are largely developed by means of communication. Mumby (2001) argues for the importance of the relationship between communication, power and organisation by saying that "organisations are intersubjective structures of meaning that are produced, reproduced and transformed through the ongoing communicative activities by its members" (p. 2). From an interpretive approach, communication is constitutive of organising and it is through employees' communicative actions that meaning and thus power is created and maintained (Mumby, 2001). Mumby raises the question of how employees construct meaning through ambiguous communication processes and comes to the conclusion that sensemaking is not only the result of mutually shared assumptions and interpretations. It is additionally shaped by the political context within which sensemaking occurs (Mumby, 2001). Power is therefore the members' capacity to control the dominant interpretations of organisational events and thus based on their intersubjective communication.

Intentionally or not, managers use their power to keep items out of their attention and neglect employee voice in the decision-making process, failing to see problems that are obvious from the employees' angle. This power asymmetry can lead employees to assess voice as risky due to the fact that their supervisors have control over rewards, material outcomes and status (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003). Thus, employees may be reluctant to engage in critical upwards communication, creating a silent organisational climate.

4. Methodology

The study utilises a qualitative methodology, where the empirical material consists of data obtained from interviews. The main reason for this choice of method is the aim of the study, which is to describe and analyse employees' perception on planned change communication. This section describes social constructionism, the analytical groundwork for the chosen methodology. Furthermore, the research design, case organisation, interview proceedings and ethical issues will be discussed. Finally, the analytical process is described.

4.1 Social constructionism

The epistemology of this study is social constructionism within which knowledge is created and maintained through social processes (Burr, 2015). Knowledge is something that we enact together with other people, rather than something that we have or do not have (Burr, 2015). Reality does therefore not exist 'out there'. Instead, we form our understanding and knowledge of our world through daily conversations with other people. Social constructionism emphasises the importance of our language when constructing our reality (Burr, 2015). Our world is based on our language, through which we share our experiences and knowledge and create a mutual interpersonal understanding of our reality (Burr, 2015). Language is then not only a form of expressing ourselves, but becomes a social action. This entails that people have different understanding of reality, dependent on their social interactions. What we believe is our truth is based on our conversations, and our reality is what we currently accept as our perception of the world.

From a social constructionist perspective, organisations are not seen as stable entities, but rather social constructions, constantly adjusting to the environment (Weick, 1995). This is because the members are continually producing and reproducing the reality of the organisation through communication (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The communication between the organisational members is therefore an essential element in creating the organisation, and the essence of making sense of the world. This entails that an organisation is held together by

shared meanings of its members and its reality is the result of the members' communication (Weick, 1995). Gergen (2015) calls this "organization as conversation" (p. 196). To elaborate, Gergen argues that by looking at organisations as conversations, employees become conversational partners and co-create the organisation together with their managers through dialogue. This allows for the employees to bring their knowledge and values to the table during change initiatives (Gergen, 2015).

Social constructionism was chosen as the perspective for this study, as it is argued that employees construct their mutual knowledge and understanding under change processes through their interaction with other members. For the interview proceedings, a social constructionist perspective entails that the researcher and interviewees co-construct a mutual understanding during the interviews. This means that I, as a researcher, together with the interviewees, co-constructed knowledge and meaning during our conversations (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), rather than aimed to find the 'truth'. From the constructionist perspective, data about humans represents a certain perspective and not an absolute truth (Patton, 2002). The interviews were therefore an intersubjective and social process between interviewees and myself.

4.2 Research design

The research method is dependent upon the research questions at matter, and the choice I had to make was whether to conduct qualitative or quantitative research. Qualitative research focuses on producing meaning from our socially constructed reality in a context-specific setting (Patton, 2002). Since the aim of this study is to understand the employees' point of view and perception towards planned change communication and to unfold the meaning of their experience, qualitative research interviews were considered a more relevant research method than quantitative (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Within qualitative research various methods are possible. The methods I considered were interviews (individual and in groups) and a multi-method approach, combining interviews with observation. Observations would provide information that participants would otherwise be unwilling to talk about in an interview (Patton, 2002). Sensitive topics such as resistance can be an example of such information. However, the study's limited time frame affected the practical possibilities of gathering empirical material. Furthermore, due to a virus

(Covid-19) that was spreading world-wide at the time the interviews took place, it was not a possibility to travel to the organisation and conduct such observations. Many employees were working from home, and the Swedish Public Health Agency advised against unnecessary travel. Moreover, this affected the possibility of group interviewing as the interviews were conducted online via an online video conferencing tool (Zoom), which can make group interviews inconvenient.

Consequently, as the study is conducted from a social constructionist perspective, the choice of method may be criticised with the argument that my assumptions may have affected the interview. Moreover, the research method can be criticised in light of the fact that it cannot be ascertained that employees answered what they genuinely thought and felt. I could prevent the interviewees from giving a ‘socially desirable’ answer or from leaving out valuable information (Fontana & Frey, 1994; O’Reilly, 2005). For that reason, an observational study could have been more valid, where the researcher both observes and has informal conversations with subjects, rather than merely asking them about their opinions and behaviour (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

To collect the empirical material, semi-structured individual interviews were organised, with open-ended questions that covered specific themes (e.g. resistance, voice and sensemaking) (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Fontana & Frey, 1994). Semi-structured interviews allow for follow-up questions on the participants’ answers in order to clarify, or to extend the participants’ statements (e.g. by following up an answer with “Do you mean ...?”). This procedure allows participants to freely describe their experience, thoughts and understanding, although not completely without presuppositions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interviews were therefore based on an interview guide with predetermined questions even though it allowed for the possibility of relevant follow-up and probing questions (i.e. “why? / why not?”) (O’Reilly, 2005).

Since social constructionism argues that objectivity is an unreachable goal, the effects of the researcher during qualitative interviews must be taken into consideration when conducting and analysing the interviews. Every researcher brings his or her preconceptions and interpretations to a study (Patton, 2002). This means that my intrinsic involvement in the interviewing process and my interaction with the interviewees has to be acknowledged. Recognising my own insights, that are based on my knowledge, when interpreting and analysing the empirical material is thus of absolute importance (Fontana & Frey, 1994). At the same time do interviews provide the advantage for the researcher to know how the research topic affects

the interviewees, how they think about it and what experiences they have. It provides the researcher with a comprehensive, in-depth and detailed understanding of the interviewees' lives by hearing their stories (Patton, 2002). As such, it can be argued for being both the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research methods.

Moreover, my knowledge may have affected the follow-up questions. The interview questions arose from my assumptions and knowledge which I could not disregard when conducting the interviews. Further, it is noteworthy to mention that an individual interviewer's bias can affect the interviews and analytical process (O'Reilly, 2005). This bias can exist when there is only one interviewer. However, due to the scope of this thesis, it was neither appropriate nor possible to involve more interviewers.

Lastly, qualitative interviews are impossible to plan in detail since they are achieved through socially constructed conversations between a researcher and each interviewee. Follow-up questions, probing questions for clarification and interviewees' personal differences are only a few examples of factors that affect the interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

4.3 The case for the study

The case organisation is a municipality in Sweden with about 70,000 citizens who is now in the process of opening a contact centre. The municipality has about 5,500 employees, who work within 27 departments. Currently, the municipality has a low rating in a national assessment that measures response and the degree of solution-orientation. The measurements show that less than half of those who contact the municipality reach the right person or get their questions or matters answered. Now, citizens have to contact each department with their issues or questions. However, each department has very short telephone hours. This has led to confusion for the citizens and difficulties for them to reach the right department or the right administrator within the department. The purpose of the contact centre is to simplify the process when citizens contact the municipality. The centre is aimed to be the first-hand answer for the most frequently existing questions that the organisation receives from the citizens concerning information, consulting and guidance.

The implementation of the contact centre started in 2014, when the idea first came to the table. In 2016 a pre-study was conducted and the decision to open a contact centre was made by the municipality's politicians in mid 2017. The budget plan was approved in 2018

and the change initiative was assigned to a project group who consists of a few employees from one of the organisation's departments. The process launched in fall 2019, where the project group started working together with employees in a reference group that included representatives from all departments. The contact centre is aimed to open in August 2020 and its establishment will be in three phases, reaching its full effect in 2023.

The change process will have as a result that some employees will work at the new contact centre, while others will be assigned different projects than they have now, and for still others the effects will be minimal or none. The effects of the change depend on what department the employees are employed at and what role they have. Employees working in the current customer service for one specific department will be affected the most, since their tasks will now mostly be handled in the new contact centre. These employees will therefore either be repositioned or, if they applied for and got a job at the contact centre, will start a new job there.

4.4 Sample selection

The process of finding an organisation interested to be involved in this study was longer and more complicated than expected. However, a public post on LinkedIn resulted in several organisations showing interest (see Appendix 3 for the content of the post). Participation criteria were that the organisation had recently or was currently undergoing a planned top-down change. I then selected one of the organisations that had responded to the LinkedIn post. I was in contact with one of the project managers for the change implementation at this organisation who chose and contacted 15 employees for interviews. The contact person allegedly strived for a variation in the interviewees regarding gender, length of employment at the organisation and department. Furthermore, the project manager and I decided that a variation in how much the employees are affected by the change process would be of interest, in order to get a diversity in perspectives.

The sampling was therefore a purposive sampling (Suri, 2011), where the purpose of the study was kept in mind when choosing the interviewees. All interviewees were employees from the same organisation but from different departments within the organisation. For this study, it was important that the interviewees were employees that were not in a managing position, since the study focuses on the employees' perspective. More specific criteria for the

interviewees was that they had not been involved in the decision-making process for the change implementation, and rather were ‘recipients’ of the change and the change communication.

The interviewees’ participation in the change process should be mentioned here. Some of them were in a so-called reference group for which the project group is responsible for. The reference group has occasionally met, and the participating employees have therefore had more possibilities to discuss issues and ask questions regarding the change. It is possible that the employees’ closeness with the project group affected their perception of and attitudes towards the contact centre in various ways. It can have led to an increased understanding regarding the change which can lead to a positive bias in their answers. I was not aware of this fact beforehand, and when I realised this during the interviews, I reflected on how other employees, who are not members of this group, perceive this change. I assume including other employees would have brought even more variety to the interviews. This issue will further be discussed later in this chapter (section *4.9 Reflections*).

4.5 Interview proceeding

In order to explore the employees’ perspective, it was important to interview them rather than managers. I contacted each interviewee that the project manager had already contacted for participating in the study. I sent them a short introduction of myself and the study and a short text that explained the arrangement of anonymity (see arrangement in Appendix 1). Over the course of four days, each employee was interviewed once, with the help of a semi-structured interview guide (see the interview guide in Appendix 2). Although the most commonly used types of interviewing are individual and face-to-face (Fontana & Frey, 1994), the interviews were online, with the help of a video conferencing tool called Zoom. The reason for the interviews being online and not in-person was due to the Covid-19 virus that was spreading around the world at the time, which required that people reduced social contexts as much as possible. It was therefore evaluated as an unnecessary risk to travel to the municipality to conduct the interviews in person.

The fact that the interviews were online can have affected the procedure. Close to none of the participants had used Zoom before, but before the interviews I sent instructions to each interviewee on how the program works. During the interviews, none of the interviewees

had problems with the program and the sound and video worked well. However, three of the interviewees did not have access to a laptop, which is why those interviews were conducted via telephone. It can still have affected the interviews that they were online and not in-person, even if everyone seemed at ease with the online program. Perhaps the interviewees felt they were less personal than if the interviews would have been in person and therefore kept their answers shorter. Moreover, the online interviews can have limited my possibilities of reading the interviewees' body language, as I generally only saw their upper part of their bodies, not hands or feet. I could therefore not detect whether they showed different body language to different questions, which can indicate their stress or reluctance.

All the 15 interviews were recorded, either via Zoom or using an application called Voice Memos on my laptop. Before the interviews themselves started, I asked every interviewee whether they had read and understood the disclaimer. Everyone gave their spoken consent to the disclaimer. To 'break the ice' for the more important questions in the interview guide, I started with background questions such as asking how long they had worked at the organisation and whether they could tell me about the contact centre. The main aim with the background questions was to make the interviewees more comfortable both because they were having an online interview that many of them have not done before, using a new program application, but also because of the topic. It might feel sensitive to talk about resistance for instance and describing their own or their colleagues' attitudes towards change. However, most of the interviewees seemed comfortable during the interviews and I could not detect them having troubles answering questions about resistance. This is my assumption since most of them did not seem to have difficulties understanding my questions and could easily and openly answer them. Furthermore, they were able to voice their critical stances as well, and not only their positive attitudes. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, since that is the interviewees' native language and I made notes during each interview to ease the transcription process and the follow-up questions. The interviews varied from 30-60 minutes. Most of them varied 45 minutes.

4.6 Ethical issues of interviewing

Ethical issues are involved in the whole interview process, not only during the interviews themselves (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This means that ethical concerns need to be taken

into consideration in every step of the interview process, from designing the interview guide to transcribing and analysing the conversations. In this study, the importance of confidentiality was made clear to the interviewees before the interviews began. Each interviewee received an email a few days before the interview with an agreement attached. The interviewees' informed consent was obtained verbally regarding recording and transcribing the interviews. The informed consent further informed the participants of the purpose of the study. During the transcription of the interviews, confidentiality was protected. Possible harmful consequences for the interviewees were considered non-existing, as anonymity regarding interviewees and organisation was obtained. In spite of the above, the topic of this study could however be considered sensitive, and employees may experience difficulty in expressing freely their thoughts on the change, as they may fear the consequences of criticising their organisation or managers.

While I as a researcher wanted the interviewees to speak freely about their thoughts regarding the topic of this study, it was also important to show respect to the interviewees and to be careful not to trespass their privacy (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). At the same time, the interviews needed to contribute with material that was 'deep' enough and interesting, in order to be useful to analyse and try to answer the research questions. This matter was kept in mind during the designing of the interview guide as well as during the interviews.

4.7 Translations

All interviews were conducted in Swedish as that was the native language of all interviewees and therefore considered more appropriate and convenient for the interviewees than English. The interviews were transcribed in Swedish to keep the context closer to its originality. For the analysis, meaningful quotes were translated from Swedish to English to publish in this essay.

4.8 Analytical process

The analytical process started by listening to each recording twice, while transcribing them. While reading through the transcripts, I categorised the empirical data by highlighting words

and phrases. However, already while conducting each interview I had marked some uttered phrases as particularly interesting for the study and possible themes came to my mind - although without rushing to incomplete conclusions. This shows that the data collection and analytical process are not as distinctive as one can imagine, since the analytical work started already during the interviews (Patton, 2002). During the transcription process, I could identify patterns indicated by the data (i.e. the transcripts) and it enabled an overview of the textual material (Patton, 2002). Each highlighted part was copied into a new document under the relevant categories that were created from my theoretical presuppositions. The eventual purpose with this process was to identify themes from the empirical material that captured the employees' experience of internal communication and voice during organisational change. This approach does not provide a universal causal generalisation but enables the researcher to identify patterns (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

4.9 Reflections

As mentioned, during the interviews, it came to my knowledge that some of the interviewees were a part of a reference group. These employees had opportunities to meet with the project group in smaller groups than for instance during the information meetings that were open for all employees, and to ask questions and receive information. Thus, it can be argued that they had more information than others and which may have brought about a bias in the empirical material. At the same time as this possible bias may be criticised, the participants consisted of employees who actually had thoughts and opinions regarding the change, because they were interested in joining this reference group. Moreover, they were able to provide long and precise answers (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). If the interviewees had been employees who were not affected by the contact centre and had no specific opinions about, it would perhaps not have yielded in engaged interviewees.

Another important reflection from the chosen method regards anonymity. As mentioned above, I had a contact person at the municipality who reached out to 15 employees and asked if they were interested in participating in this study. Thus, there is a limitation in the selectivity of employees who were asked to participate, and it can be argued that there was not full anonymity as this contact person knew who was participating in the study. Moreover, in a small study that explores topics that can be perceived as sensitive, such as employees' per-

sonal opinion towards the planned communication, anonymity can be crucial in order for employees to dare discuss their honest thoughts. This means that perhaps there was an interviewee who was even more critical or negative than he or she appeared in the interview. Before each interview started, I thus emphasised that the information would be handled anonymously and that if the interviewees were to discuss matters that could easily point out who they are, it would not be included.

However, during the interviews, I could not sense that any of the interviewees were withholding any opinions and I consider the interviewees to have been fairly comfortable during the interviews despite lack of complete anonymity and sensitive topics. The reason why I argue for that is because the employees expressed critique and negative opinions as well as their more positive ones. Their tone of voice and lack of hesitation when answering questions lift this argument further. The interviews felt personal and the interviewees even asked me personal questions and showed a great interest in the study. Many of them mentioned that they thought it was important to explore the change process from the employees' view. It seems that an open atmosphere had been created which allowed for the employees to express their personal opinions.

Power asymmetry is another factor to take into consideration during interviews as it can affect socially desirable answers. This is relevant for cases where the interviewer is seen as of a higher status to whom the interviewee wants to answer 'correctly' (O'Reilly, 2005). I did not encounter any behaviour that can be explained as power asymmetry during the interviews. It is therefore considered non-existing in this study, since the interviewees have more experience of the organisation and their profession than the interviewer has.

Lastly, this study is based on a top-down, planned change in a case organisation that is a Swedish municipality. The findings may therefore not be representative of other types of changes, organisations or personnel, and thus the knowledge-transfer is limited.

5. Analysis

In the following chapter, findings of an interview study on how employees in a Swedish municipality perceive planned change communication will be presented, analysed and discussed. The findings and their analysis are divided into a few themes that were developed from the empirical material. This section will begin with a short introduction of the studied case organisation where the focus will be on the change-perspective, rather than the organisation itself. The analysis that derived from the identified themes will then be presented.

5.1 Introduction to the case organisation

The organisational change at matter was a top-down change implementation. It was a political decision to open a contact centre at this municipality, which entailed that all departments had to be involved in the envisaged contact centre. The discussion on opening a contact centre has been ongoing since 2014, as mentioned in the method section (p. 22). The fact that it was a political decision was pointed out in every interview, and it provided me with the understanding that this fact weighs heavily on how employees perceive the change.

Every department had to create and gather so-called checklists for the employees that will be working at the contact centre. The checklists include matters that the centre will be handling instead of the departments themselves. These can be general matters such as when citizens call to ask for opening hours, or more detailed matters such as asking about private construction permits. For the employees, this is perceived as a relief, when they now will not have to answer such questions anymore. However, this also created concerns regarding how the employees (who will be about 10-15) at the contact centre are supposed to have adequate knowledge about every department to be able to answer such matters relying mainly on information obtained from the checklists. The employees will receive training from each department based on their checklists.

Currently, all the departments within the municipality have some kind of function that its citizens can perceive as a customer service that they can contact. However, as mentioned in

the method section (section 4.3 *The case for the study*), each department has separate telephone hours that are quite short (e.g. two hours a day, four days a week). Moreover, the number of citizens that try to contact respective department during their telephone hour is generally too high for the employees to respond to. This has led to a discontent amongst the citizens when they have tried to reach a specific department, and a majority of them have not gotten their questions or issues answered. The new contact centre, on the other hand, will be the ‘one way in’ to the municipality. That means that the citizens will have only one telephone number, that is open daily on regular office hours, one email address and one Facebook page through which they can reach the municipality, regardless of the matter. The aim is that all incoming matters will be handled first-hand at the contact centre. This is both supposed to increase the response rate and the level of service and to simplify for those who live and work in the city to contact the municipality. In the long run, the hope is that this will strengthen the city’s brand. For the employees, the contact centre will free up their time since a majority of general incoming matters will now be handled in the contact centre. Employees can therefore put more time and quality in processing diverse matters. The contact centre entails a reorganisation, with internal and external hiring and some employees being repositioned. However, the expected effects of the change differ greatly between employees. Some will probably not notice any changes at all after the contact centre opens.

A project group was created to handle the internal communication regarding the change and has been responsible for creating a communication plan for the process. Their work regarding the internal communication has involved hosting open information meetings that every employee can attend and creating a so-called reference group with employee representatives from all departments that employees were invited to apply for participating in. It is therefore worth mentioning that the reference group includes employees who applied for participating in it and were accepted in it. There were thus additional employees who applied but were not invited to join the group. The project group has further shared news about the contact centre in the municipality’s intranet group, created and distributed presentations and created an information leaflet. The adoption of the contact centre affects all departments of the organisation and is evaluated as an extensive process that will bring about large-scale changes for the organisation and for the employees’ way of working.

5.2 Background conversations that affect the employees' opinions of a change initiative

The first and perhaps the most obvious theme was how the employees had formed their different opinions of the opening of a contact centre. Some were extremely positive towards it, others were very sceptical that it would provide any benefits and still others were afraid it would negatively affect their department. At first, it may be considered unusual, especially because employees from the same department had completely different perceptions of the change. However, as the interviews continued, it became apparent that they had previously engaged in or been involved in very different experiences regarding contact centres.

From an organisational perspective, the background conversations constitute the organisation. This means that these conversations establish the context in which employees act and react. Background conversations are thus for instance how employees give historical accounts of previous changes within the organisation. These conversations then set the dynamics of the current change process (Ford, 1999). In this case, the background conversations that seem to be existing at the municipality express somewhat of a scepticism towards changes, presumably due to their previous experience of changes within the municipality. This was explained by some interviewees, saying that in general there was scepticism regarding whether the contact centre will be to their benefit or not and was expressed by one interviewee as follows:

“You are not sceptical of the contact centre, that there will be a contact centre, but it is more "will you really profit from this or is this just big expense for us." You do not see the benefit and it creates concerns and questioning that we have not been able to let go.”

Others expressed scepticism in the form that their first reaction to hearing about the centre was that they were certain that it would not open, even if they now were very positive towards it. Moreover, many interviewees expressed that they did not expect that it would open on the given date (August 2020). These opinions are exemplified in the following quotes:

“[At first] I didn't think it would open, but I am very positive about it. Not getting calls or simpler questions like "can you send the form" will free up a lot of time for me.”

“It will certainly not open in August, from previous experience. But I have not lost hope, you will not be surprised if it is delayed.”

The scepticism expressed also seemed to be based on the fact that it was a political decision and the fear that it was a change for the change’s sake, not for any benefits, as expressed by this employee when asked about his/her first reaction:

“This first thought has been if it is actually needed, in case there will a positive change or whether it will only be a change because you have to have a change. But then of course with this contact centre you will save a lot of time and I think about myself when I forward a lot of conversations on to the right colleague or department, and think it will go much faster for the citizens and their response with the contact centre, and it will relieve the work for each department.”

Yet others were sceptical towards it being a positive change or whether it would mainly lead to economical savings for the municipality:

“At first I was a bit sceptical. I don’t think that everything that is ongoing leads to improvements. Sometimes it rather leads to centralisation and economical savings for the municipality. I think this is a large investment, and I was sceptical and like was waiting to see how it would be.”

From the empirical material, it can be argued that perhaps the employees do not think that the political decisions are in line with the organisations’ benefits. It was often used as an ‘excuse’ by the managers for the change initiative that it was a political decision and that is just how it works for municipalities. These sceptical background conversations cannot be brought to the foreground without a dialogue or discussion (Ford, Ford & McNamara, 2002). It would therefore have been important here that employees not only have access to information. There needs to be a forum to discuss the information. In order to be able to grasp this change with a different response than in the past (i.e. sceptical response), there needs to be a possibility to bring those background conversations to the surface (Ford, 1999). This will further be discussed later in the analysis (section 5.6).

5.3 Planned change without planned communication activities?

The employees' understanding of the centre was dependent on their individual and collective sensemaking processes. As discussed in the theoretical overview, employees engage in conversations with each other to try to make sense of a change and these conversations generally differ from that of their managers' (Weick, 1995). Their sensemaking process and background conversations seem to have entailed these different opinions or views of the change. Even employees within the same departments differed in their ideas of it.

In this case, the cause for the sensemaking process was the announcement of a contact centre. For the interviewees, the announcement varied. The employees have diverse work-age within the organisation. Because of that, some of them had heard about the contact centre during their job interview only a few months ago, while others had heard rumours about it for a few years. Other employees have assignments that entail that they know about such political decisions before other employees and therefore heard about the planned contact centre earlier than others. Furthermore, employees who have been within the organisation for many years, were aware of the pre-study and were prepared that it might open in due course. There was therefore no one official announcement of this change, or at least not that the interviewees could recall. The fact that employees received information about the change at different times and from different people can have affected their understanding and their sensemaking. This first information they gain about the contact centre will influence their future expectations, which can result in future surprises or disappointments as the change process continues, based on their expectations, as Weick et al. argued (2005).

This demonstrates that a collective understanding was absent. A collective understanding could have reduced eventual misunderstanding and gotten all employees to accept the contact centre and to understand why it will open. Notably, this does not mean that every employee should have the same opinion about the change, but they should have a common understanding for what the change is about and why it will be implemented. There may have been a need for a more common view towards the contact centre in order to get the best possible outcome of the change.

At the same time, a lack of a collective view is to be expected when there has not been any holistic communication process across the organisation regarding the contact centre. It can be argued that this planned change process was lacking a planned communication. More specifically, it can be argued that the project group was kind of a separate path in the organi-

sation, that existed somewhat externally or besides the organisation rather than being a part of it and involved in its departments. Some employees were even unsure of whom the project group consisted, as expressed by the following interviewee:

“I would not have a problem going to the project group and discuss. But the thing is really, I don’t know who the project group consists of? [mentions three names he/she thinks the project group consists of]. But I don’t know how big the group is. I can guess who are in it, but I don’t really know.”

This means that the project group seems to have been more on the side with their planned communication and a shared understanding amongst the employees was therefore not created. Rather, it was the project group who created a kind of separate understanding, and invited a few employees to participate, e.g. through the reference group. Moreover, although there were some planned communicative activities (such as the information meetings), many employees did not receive the information that was exchanged. The open information meetings were for instance scheduled on a normal work hour which made it difficult for many of the employees to attend them. They were not be able to leave their work for the meetings since they would then be too few left at the office. For other employees, the information meetings were not prioritised, which is why they did not attend them. Further, the reference group consisted of only a few employees of the 5,500 who work at the municipality, which limits the number of employees who take part of the information there.

The fact that the project group became more separate from the organisation as a whole created somewhat of an isolated way for the employees to grasp and to make sense of the change. This can further explain why the employees had such different understandings of the change. Perhaps it would have created a more common understanding if there had been a forum for each department to discuss the change. There, they could have discussed the change with other employees they have more in common with and could have been able to create a common understanding. This is concluded from the following quote:

“I think they have explained the benefits for the citizens quite well. Then I think that they maybe should have given more support to the departments, instead of saying that now it’s up to each and every department to do this. Centrally, I think it had been needed to think more about that and offer more support to each department and involve them in this. You know, like explaining for the departments instead of just releasing it freely to them and like now it’s your responsibility. I think we would have gained from that.”

Another employee elaborated on this thought and when asked whether he/she had opinions on what could have been done otherwise, the interviewee said that:

“What could have been done better is that my department is bad at sending information, we could have been more informed of the contact centre. Then they have invited us to the information meetings which I missed, but I don’t think they were so much advertised. They could have had more information on a manager-level, that our nearest manager informs us. Maybe that would have been better. It feels like it has been such general information and high up. It could have been closer to us.”

When the employees then sought to contact the project group, they seemed ‘high up’ in the organisational ladder and hard to reach, as this employee further explained:

“We have had continuous information with [the department] who is responsible for the contact centre. We have had workshops and information meetings and there we get information on where we are in the process and what is the plan, so that has worked well. What hasn’t worked so well is the contact itself with the people at the contact centre, or I mean the department who is taking care of this. It’s been hard to reach them, I know they have had a lot to do, but still, it’s been hard to reach them, if you call them or email them, you need to call and email repeatedly before you get an answer.”

This further supports the argument that the project group was somewhat separate from the organisation, and employees in general had difficulties reaching them with questions or thoughts. However, as will be discussed later in the analysis, it seemed to depend on what kind of questions or thoughts the employees had, whether they received answers or not.

Many employees further expressed that they did not discuss the contact centre with their co-workers or with their nearest managers because they were not enough informed or not enough interested in the matter. The following quote explains this further:

“At my department, I don’t perceive like it [the contact centre] was something really well-known. It was nothing we [employees] talked much about but it was our top manager who mentioned it to me in the summer and it was nothing that my colleagues on my department talked a lot about or such. Generally, it has been a little struggle to understand what it is we are supposed to do and such but as I said based on my role, I am very positive in principle.”

When asked whether they had discussed the change process or issues around it with their managers, many answered that they had not due to various reasons as can be seen in the quotes below:

“I don’t think I have had any dialogue with [the nearest manager] about the contact centre at all. I don’t think he/she is that much informed about the contact centre. I would not go first-hand to him/her with my questions or thoughts about the centre, I’d rather go to [employee in the project group].”

“That’s the thing. I haven’t received anything from our nearest manager, more than he/she does not know. So, we have been quite worried and not knowing where we will go from here, which department we will belong to when the centre opens. The problem is with the department managers. Maybe it would have helped us to think from other perspectives and figure out that “oh that’s right, these consequences can even hit us.” You are so narrow-minded in your own little bubble. You need to know how the other bubbles are thinking and have reacted.”

The fact that there was a lack of general discussions between employees and between employees and their nearest manager, seems to have led to this isolated way of grasping the change and making sense of it. The sensemaking process is a crucial factor for organisational changes: without employees and managers being able to make sense of a change, there will not be any change (Simonsson & Heide, 2020). This has thus resulted in the lack of a common understanding.

As mentioned above, there was no one official announcement about the contact centre that reached all employees. Some of the interviewees mentioned that there was a post on the intranet that announced it. However, many of them said they were not active there, and that posting such news on the intranet felt very general and distant from the employees themselves. In the interviews it was discussed that they had preferred the news coming from their nearest manager, in order for it to be more personal and comprehensible. As the change process continued, no insights or experiences were obtained across departments. Employees from one department did not know how the change was perceived in other departments, what problems they had come across and how they were handling the change process. This further affirms their isolated way to understand the change and was acknowledged in some of the interviews, where employees expressed a need for more communication across departments to be able to learn from each other. Even within departments, there was a lack of collaboration. The lack of insights across departments makes one wonder how employees are supposed to work towards the municipality’s motto: “The best possible [municipality]” if they do not have a general insight. As one employee phrased it:

“I don’t know anything, you know, I don’t know anything about other departments and how they think and discuss about the change. A key word about the communication is therefore: no internal openness. For example [specific department] thinks this is really difficult. Is there some other department who is specifically positive or negative? It has been so quite between departments about their reactions.”

Moreover, the employee elaborated on this thought by saying:

“It would have been nice to hear, from an organisational perspective, to have a very transparent and open arena about this, whether there actually are problems within some departments. The information that we get is sometimes like some promotional message for washing powder you know, like: “Here it is, the new, fantastic washing powder!” But we should rather focus on our context, that this is a public organisation.”

Another employee said the common ground was lacking and it felt more like each department was a separate organisation:

“The thing that is difficult and can feel negative is that we should work more together, everyone, and become a ‘we’, as we who work together, we should strive for the same direction.”

In order to generate a common perceived understanding across departments, management in general needs to create arenas where this general insight and sensemaking can arise, instead of leaving it up to each employee to find information (Madsen, 2018). The interviews point to the fact that there was much information available for the employees. However, there seems to have been a lack of forums for the employees to discuss the information and the change in general. Spreading information is not enough to create a common understanding about the change. It is as necessary to have arenas where employees have the opportunity to make sense of and discuss the available information, in order to create a general understanding of it (Deetz, 1995). This does not seem to have been of focus for management in this case, rather the focus was on sending out information. This then led to different perceptions of the contact centre between individuals and across departments, and therefore very varied understanding of it.

5.4 Employees' perception of their communicative role in a planned change

The employees had varied views of the change, presumably due to their individual experience of contact centres, because of their varied involvement in the change process or even due to their managers' reactions towards it. Moreover, they had very different opinions on the communication and information during the change process. The ones who were more positive towards the contact centre expressed satisfactory communication from the project managers. Moreover, they saw it as their own responsibility to seek the information they wanted. They therefore took the initiative to look up information on the intranet or to contact the project group if they had any questions or thoughts. While some said it was their own responsibility to seek information, others mentioned that they had not received enough information. This is made clearer in the following quotes, demonstrating the different opinions in whose responsibility it is to initiate the communication and provide information:

“It is up to everyone to get the information they want. There has been openness about being allowed to do so. Information has been good, clear, and then it is the thing with information and communication; it is up to everyone to absorb information.”

However, the following employee expressed the opposite opinion:

“We ask our manager so often how it will look like and he/she only says: “I know that there will at least one person from this customer service be transferred and I will get back to you with more information”. We were supposed to get information at the beginning of March, but we got no information at all [...]. The internal communication here with us has not worked at all.”

These quotes show that there exists a variation in the employees' attitude towards the communication and information flow. Further, this makes one speculate whether employees actually perceive themselves as the passive 'change recipients' that research within the field of organisational changes paints them as and was discussed in the introduction of this thesis: perceiving their role in the planned change as only the receivers of information that their managers transmit to them.

The interviews therefore unravel somewhat of a contradiction. The employees who waited for information from their managers or the project group did not discuss how they themselves might have a role in finding this information by their own initiative, or what other roles they might perceive as having in this change process. At the same time does other research suggest that employees are crucial during organisational changes and should therefore be included in decision-making processes and not considered recipients of change processes anymore (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). The question is whether the employees still look at the manager-employee relationship as the traditional top-down communication, perceiving that their managers have the power and are supposed to lead the communication and flow of information. This indicates that some employees perceive their role from a more transmission view on communication, where managers are the senders and employees the receivers. The employees are then left to understand and accept this information without any feedback or response (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014).

However, as indicated by the following quote, other employees were not satisfied with only receiving information through different channels. As the quote exhibits, they rather sought for a dialogue about the change:

“I think this is really emotional because we have a really good customer service in one of our departments. They are really worried about their jobs. And to create a positive feeling about the contact centre, they just need to inform of like the small things as well. You know “now we have had the interviews, now we will start building the centre”. I think this is really big for [name of the municipality] and how we are supposed to change our way of working. Then I personally would have liked to see a continuous dialogue around this and definitely not this here, referring to a page on the intranet when we ask questions. You want to hear something about the process regularly, whether it is big or small information. [...] Like to know for instance that ten will be hired for the contact centre, whereof three will be internally hired. It went out big, but then there was a lack of continuity. You inform of something big, and then there is nothing.”

Research has in fact argued for various communicative roles that employees take on during change processes (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019). They have then been acknowledged to use their communication internally to for instance make sense of information, stimulate innovation and criticise the organisational decisions. As such, they become active communicators in the organisation (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). Through their communicative role, they are therefore no longer the passive recipients of managers’ messages. Rather, they become knowledge-sharers that develop and share their ideas and by that they empower their role as employees as well as the organisational functioning (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019).

From the interviews, the employees in the municipality can for instance be defined sensemakers and critics, which are two of the eight categories of employees' communicative role identified in Madsen and Verhoeven's (2019) literature review. In this case, the sensemaker then aims to organise the information to create an understandable meaning. This can be demonstrated from the quote below for instance:

“At first I wondered whether this was necessary and whether it would make any difference. But then when I thought about it and discussed with my colleagues, I understood that our customer service is not good right now, it hasn't worked well. So, this will be much better. I have become more positive the longer the process has been ongoing, about how it will work and what we are currently missing.”

The communicative role as a critic in the change process was identified by the employees who questioned the change decision, raised their voice to their managers, project group or colleagues and sought to discuss the weak points of the process. This was concluded from some of the interviewees as exemplified below:

“I tried to raise my voice last fall, regarding the contact centre and that we should already then start thinking about adapting to the new way of working. But I just got the response that it was not an actual topic right then. So, I understood the connection between the centre and [a personal task assignment], and saw it was a topic that should be discussed, but they didn't.”

It was further identified that employees considered it was not enough that the project group only shared sporadic posts in their intranet group about the change process. Information on the intranet felt more distant than if it came from one's own manager and the employees sought for more personal and 'closer' interaction. However, the interviewees who were in the reference group mentioned that information provided had helped them to feel involved in the process. It is therefore rather evident, and understandable, that the participation of the employees in the limited reference group provided them with advantages during the change process as can be seen in the following quote:

“I feel that I have received a lot of information because I have been in the [reference] group on several occasions with [employee in the project group] where we have asked questions and had a dialogue with him/her. And that is where I got the information.”

However, employees had to apply to the group and not everyone who applied was invited to join it. The reference group was therefore a very limited group including only a few people.

It became clear during the interviews that this is where most employees experienced some kind of resistance. Several interviewees mentioned that those employees who were negative towards the change or expressed their scepticism did so because they did not fully understand certain aspects of the change. Those who then did not understand the change had either not participated in the information meetings or been a part of the reference group or had not been active in the intranet group, and had therefore an uninformed and limited overview of the change process, and as a consequence, a more negative attitude towards it as expressed by one interviewee as follows:

“Of course, those people exist, those who think changes in general are difficult and that they think they always need to be sceptical at the beginning, that is just a part of it. But most of those who are negative here, I think they have just not understood it. But then it’s not like someone has walked around and talked negatively in this sense of the word, but more that they have been sceptical.”

This is relevant to Dent and Goldberg’s (1999) theory of resistance discussed in the theoretical overview (section 3.2. *Background conversations*). They argue that resistance is not towards the change itself or something within the individual. The empirical material is in line with their argument in that employees rather resist for instance the unknown or the fact that they have to accept a change process that they do not consider suitable for their organisation. They further argue against the prevalent notion towards resistance as it being something that management needs to overcome (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). It was mentioned before that the employees were somewhat sceptical towards the change being beneficial, based on their background conversations from earlier change processes. This seems to have been the foundation for some of the employees’ seemingly resistant opinions towards the contact centre.

However, some employees mentioned how the critique and scepticism can be used as the employees’ knowledge-input for the change, which is in accordance with Dent and Goldberg’s (1999) arguments. This was exemplified by one employee as:

“I think that you should be able to express those things and to get to have a dialogue where you can try to answer those things. I think that people have the right to say what they fear and worry about. Maybe they have good criticism and they can bring a deeper understanding for others. Then it will

be easier to, in the next step, accept the change and to be engaged in it. That is what is needed for it to work. Of course, I don't think that someone should be mean or unpleasant towards others, or something like that. I just think it belongs to such a process."

This means that the employees' reactions or opinions should not be disregarded or perceived as resistance. Rather, it is a part of their communicative role to express their constructive communication for the benefits of the municipality.

5.5 Communicating about the planned change communication

The most difficult part of the change process for many employees was to understand why the contact centre needs to open, and how it will change their everyday work. Uncertainty during change generally involves job-related questions, which came clear in the interviews. It raises questions such as "what will happen to me?" and "what does this mean for my job?" (Weick, 1995). Therefore, as expected, employees expressed uncertainty regarding what the change would mean for their job, whether they would be affected or not, and how they might be affected. Concrete and practical information and examples of how exactly their work will be in the future was missing. The information about the contact centre had created ambiguity for employees as the change process was perceived by some as unclear and highly complex.

More so, months after the information about the contact centre had been published, employees still perceived their knowledge about the proposed centre as unclear. As ambiguity is explained as too much information is available (as discussed in the theoretical overview), (Weick, 1995) it can be suggested that this was the case here. The employees had access to information on the meetings, if they were in the reference group, from the intranet, and from personal contact with their managers or the project group. If this led to too much information, it only creates a lack of sensemaking opportunities about that information. It does not make the change clearer, as one might assume with so much information available. This ambiguity can be decreased if the employees were to have dialogues in order to make sense of the information. However, that does not seem to have been the case here, they were not able to create their own arguments about the change, which can have led to their uncertainty about the contact centre.

However, what was clear for many of the employees were the benefits of the centre for the citizens. The empirical material points to the fact that the focus of the internal commu-

nication was how the contact centre would increase the citizens' contentment with the municipality. The aim with the communication activities from the project group was for the employees to understand the benefits of the centre for the citizens. One employee mentioned that while this has obviously been the main focus of the planned communication, the employee perspective is somewhat left out. That is, it raises speculation whether the benefits for the citizens are at the expense of the employees' work and can be summarised from the quotes below:

“The material that the project group has presented has been really clear, like the benefits for the citizens. That has generally been really clear, and they have been good in explaining that. But the hard thing I think is to explain how exactly this will ease the work for the departments. To be as clear as you can, that's where I think they have missed a bit. I think there are two separate parts: one part explains the benefits for the citizens but then there is the other part, what exactly are we going to do. That's the difficult part for the departments, to understand what we are going to do. So, they [the planned communication activities] mostly focus on internal communication, but the focus on the internal communication is the benefits for the citizens.”

This employee then further explains how it has been perceived as a paradox, when the managers say that their customer service rate is low, even though it is high in a specific department:

“The idea is great for our citizens but then it becomes like we already have a fully functioning customer service here with us [at one specific department]. We are open on the phone between 8-12 and between 13-15 so that we have as well as our own customer service and we have a 95 percent customer satisfaction with us. It has worked great here at our department. It becomes like a contrast when the managers say that we have no functioning customer service that citizens are satisfied with, even though they are satisfied with you so that it becomes like a contrast.”

The fact is that some departments have customer service that has a very high service rate. It was therefore hard for some employees to understand that there is a need for an improvement. However, the overall customer service for the whole municipality is much lower and the contact centre is supposed to increase the general service rate. The interviewees generally emphasised the fact that the contact centre is positive for the citizens. It was clear that it was easier for the employees to make sense of the change regarding the citizens than themselves. This can therefore mean that interviewees had two separate sensemaking processes ongoing. One for the citizens and another for them as employees, where the former was much less ambigu-

ous and created less uncertainty as most interviewees could see the positive impact it would have for the citizens.

Interviewees further mentioned that all information came from the project group and not one's own department manager. Interviewees discussed that a few managers did not keep a good track of the change process and did not have enough information themselves to provide their employees with. However, it transpired that employees were not sure whether their managers really did not know the answer to their questions or if they knew but did not want to answer them as expressed below:

"I do not know if it is because they [managers] do not want to say something or if they do not know at all but I do not know."

"Sometimes I feel they know more than they say, but then maybe it is something they have not been able to say."

It can therefore be assumed that the employees wanted more information than the managers could or would provide them with, which in itself is not so unexpected. However, what is interesting is that, again, the employees put themselves in the 'receiver' position, waiting for information from the managers, instead of having the initiative themselves.

Moreover, what can be identified from this discussion is the lack of managements' met-communication with the employees about the actual change communication. That is, there was a lack of the managers communicating about what kind of communication they could provide employees with during different periods of the change process. It is therefore suggested that management should be clear in the beginning of a change process what kind of information they can provide the employees with and at what time during the change. In this case, they did not have exact plans on how everyone's work will be affected which is why they could not provide that kind of practical information to the employees. This could have been communicated clearly to the employees in order to hinder confusion, discontent or even rumours. However, as that was not done, the employees kept waiting for information and this, in fact, created rumours and further scepticism towards the change and the leaders, as mentioned by some of the interviewees.

5.6 Different types of employee voice and their varied responses

It was evident that employees perceived the organisational climate as an open climate and they felt they could voice their opinions. Some mentioned that no one walks around afraid of saying their opinion. Employees have a ‘high ceiling’, meaning that they feel it is safe to voice their opinions, suggestions and ideas. In general, they were pleased with the opportunities they had to present their ideas or input into the change process. A few employees emphasised the fact that they had been involved in the process (i.e. by being accepted into the reference group) and that the project group wanted the employees’ input, because the employees are the ones who know what matters they receive from the citizens. One interviewee said that:

“For one time’s sake it was first and foremost employees [participating at a workshop]. It was both managers and employees, but much more employees were invited than usually. I say this because it is actually, we [employees] who know how the work is every day. Honestly, the managers do not always know that. I thought that was really good.”

There was general contentment among employees about their involvement and the fact that they were the ones to create the checklists for the contact centre. Some employees were invited to a workshop with the project group where the aim was to figure out which tasks should be moved from respective departments to the contact centre.

The employees voice and participation in the change process therefore seemed at first like a schoolbook example. However, as the interviews continued, it emerged what kind of voice each employee had been invited to and what type of voice was responded to. The change process started already in 2016 with a pre-study (mentioned in section 4.1 *The context for the study*). However, the employees were only recently involved, when a few of them were invited to the reference group. This means that at the time the employees were involved in the process, everything had already been decided and they were not able or invited to participate in the decision-making process – or in the change process in general – until it officially kicked off in 2019.

Interestingly was the notion that even though the employees had this very limited participation in the change process and therefore limited impact on it, they seemed to be satisfied with their role. More specifically, it seemed that they were not expecting their participation to be of a larger degree than it was. None of the employees discussed any dissatisfaction regarding their narrow participation during the process. It can therefore be questioned whether the organisation as a whole has ended up with a very limited perception of what employee partic-

ipation really means. Perhaps it is perceived enough to have for instance the reference group, call it participation and be satisfied with that. Perhaps this is the employees' trained way of limited participation in change processes. As mentioned earlier, they seem to have gotten used to regular political decisions that include some changes for them, and the interviewees expressed that *"that's just how it works in a municipality"*. This can then have led to their limited view on participation, thinking they cannot request to for instance participate in the decision-making process, which is why they are content with their restricted involvement in the current change.

This finding is in line with Madsen (2018) who argues that even though employees are invited to the change process, employee participation perhaps is not the genuine desire within the organisation. Rather, it is more of a symbolic action, where managers are willing to make employees more engaged in the change process, but at the same time they fear losing control to the employees regarding decision making. It therefore becomes a manager-driven participation in order to build employee engagement where the dominance of leaders over employees is reinforced, rather than an employee empowering approach through a more communicative leadership. With the empowering approach, the employees would be able to influence their work because their participation can improve decision making based on their knowledge and therefore contribute to an innovative and more effective organisation that applies the employees' knowledge to the organisational work (Johansson, 2015).

This further holds hands with the findings regarding employee voice, that indicated that the employees were given the opportunity to voice their opinions and get a response only in certain circumstances. The input that the employees were asked to provide was on practical issues, such as what matters to include on the checklists and what kinds of issues and questions they generally receive from the citizens. Obviously, only the employees (not managers) have this information, since they are the ones that generally have these task assignments, not their managers. Furthermore, just because employees had the opportunity to ask questions or express their thoughts by attending the information meetings, writing on the intranet or asking in the reference group, does not mean that their thoughts were necessarily acknowledged or responded to which was expressed by one employee as follows:

"We have been able to tell what and how we do it today. Not how you could do instead or how the process could be improved. We have not always received answers but always been able to say what you think and then you have hoped that they will take it further."

What was indicated in some interviews, was that employees with simple questions for instance regarding the checklists, generally received quick answers from their managers or the project group, as explained by this employee for instance:

“I have received continuous information from the manager and the project group. Then we have had some questions like what kind of information we should include in the checklists and then we have received answers.”

Another employee had similar experience:

“I booked a meeting with [employee in the project group], who asked us to create the checklists. We were not really sure of what they expected, like what at what level regarding details for the issues on the checklists they should be. That meeting was really productive. And this is what they have encouraged us to do the whole time”

However, if the employees’ questions regarded concrete changes in their work, the functioning of the contact centre or the internal changes restructuring that will take place once the centre opens, there were few answers. These employees expressed how long it had taken to receive answers and that in the end they have given up trying to get answers from their managers or the project group. The same can be said about employees in the department that will partly be laid down and replaced by the contact centre. They have had to continuously ask for information about how their work will look for those who will not work for the contact centre, without receiving answers. An interviewee mentioned that this uncertainty about their jobs has created great concerns amongst them and was convinced that if their manager would explain how the work will be, they will come to ease. This was concluded from the quotes below, amongst others:

“I don’t mean anything bad, but I experience it, and my colleagues too, that we have had to wait around to find out that there are two people from our department that will be able to go to the new contact centre. How that job will be managed, we don’t know, I guess we will see. And it just feels like they are decorating the information so much, and that’s difficult. For me personally, honestly, I have been on and asked since last year and we have not received any answers. So, for my part I feel like I just don’t care about it anymore. However, I feel bad for my colleagues, but we have nagged about this so much, but nothing happens.”

Others that were sceptical towards this change and wondered whether it would affect their department negatively frequently received the answer that this was a political decision and that every department must be involved. This was expressed by one interviewee as follows:

“It is not the first time [for a political decision]. These decisions come all the time, different decisions from the politicians [...]. It is a daily life that we live with all the time. This is how it works, and we know that. The politicians talk about what we should do and how to do it.”

The employees who were responded to by their managers referring to it as a political decision, considered it a poorly wording of an answer in order to engage the employees in the change process, as seen from the quote below:

“Some have realised that this has to be done. It’s quite a lot like our managers refer to this is a political decision and sometimes it has been phrased like that and that’s alright, but sometimes you say it is a political decision as an explanation as to why we have to do this. I think it is okay to say so sometimes, but it is important and try to understand for yourself [for the managers] why, when you say like it is a political decision, it is not the best way to engage employees and such. So, I think that for many employees, there has probably been the feeling that this is something we have to, and it is not quite obvious what the point is.”

This indicates that the employee voice received very limited responses, and the responses were generally only towards the more positive or simple voice, questions or opinions. It can therefore be argued that the managers and project group focused more on disseminating information to the employees, rather than genuinely seeking input from them, which is in line with Lewis’ study (2000) discussed in the literature overview. Employees who had given positive feedback or input and thoughts said they were content with how their ideas were met and that they easily and quickly received answers. However, the employees who had more complicated questions and perhaps voiced concerns regarding the change, expressed much more difficulties in receiving answers to their questions. The employee voice in this case can therefore be explained as the employees’ opportunity for “venting” (Madsen, 2018; p. 616), instead of being acknowledged as constructive communication for the organisational benefits (Madsen, 2018). It can then be question what value such employee voice has, for the employees and for the organisation. This is a further example of how the employee voice and participation was manager-driven and how the aim was not to empower the employees or provide them with control in decision making. Rather, their opinion was only in the form of letting off steam in the hope of becoming more engaged, as suggested by Madsen (2018). Had there

been communication forums for the employees to voice their thoughts in order to contribute with their ideas and opinions, the voice would have had considerably more value.

It therefore seems that due to a variety of reasons, the project group and managers filtered what input they wanted to acknowledge and listen to and choose to mainly address the more positive feedback, producing managerial decisions that are inappropriate from the employees' viewpoint. In line with Tourish and Robson's (2006) research, this led to a lack of critical upwards communication and further entailed the managers' possibly incorrect perception of the communication climate. The employees' supportive voice was rewarded with response, while the dissented voice was suppressed. The lack of this critical voice has in fact been established as one of the causal factors for organisational problems, as for instance failed change initiatives (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

In summary, the empirical material points to the direction that some employees had the opportunities and forums to ask questions and raise their thoughts. However, the difference between forum and voice should not be ignored. Deetz (1995) emphasised this difference and argued that although there is a forum for employees to discuss, there can still be a lack of genuine and valuable voice. It was, for instance, fairly obvious that the more negative employees with demanding questions were more or less set aside. They did not have the same opportunity to voice their valuable opinions. Employees who, in general were positive towards the contact centre, however, experienced less problems in receiving responses. The employee's representation of their perspective therefore became skewed and the value of their voice case can be questioned.

6. Discussion and conclusions

In order to answer the research questions that guided the study, this section will present a discussion based on the analysis. Analytical generalisations from the empirical material will be provided and explained, as well as the study's contribution to theory and practice. Lastly, the limitations of this study will be presented, together with recommendations for further research within this field.

6.1 Discussion

From the analytical examination of the empirical material, several results can be proposed. Most notably, the analysis generated thought provoking and rather contradictory results regarding the concept 'change recipients', calling for further analysis. It is worthy to mention that this aspect (change recipient) was not the study's original focus. It rather derived as an interesting aspect from the interviews. While much of the current organisational literature emphasises the growing importance of the employees and how they are a crucial factor for an organisation's sustainability, the analysis of the empirical material yielded somewhat paradoxical outcomes. The employees longed for information regarding what the change process would involve for them personally. The fact that employees are interested in being involved in the process has been suggested from other studies as well, and this study therefore adds to their findings. One example of such a study is Christensen's (2014), where she argues for a direct employee involvement in planning and implementing change initiatives in order to use their contribution for a viable organisational change.

However, in order to be involved in the process, one has to show initiative and take matters into one's own hands. Here, many employees did not consider it their own responsibility to stay informed of the change process. This adds to the findings of Andersson, Heide, Nothhaft, von Platen and Simonsson (2018), who suggest that, in general, there is a lack of clarified communicative rolls of the employees. Furthermore, it can be questioned whether their responsibility was discussed with their managers at any moment, or whether it was on the agenda at all. To some extent, it seems that the mangers and the project group expected

the employees to keep themselves updated by being active on the intranet and observing their mail, and one employee mentioned that there has been openness about how employees need to search for information if they want the information. However, the employees themselves expressed that it varied how active they actually were on the intranet and how much they used their mail. This can indicate the lack of clarified communicative rolls under this change process, which can lead to inefficiency, and further reinforces the idea that it is the managers' responsibility to contribute with information. Since research generally studies this topic from the managers' perspective, it has not been possible to analyse it from the employees' perspective. This is therefore an example of studies that now provides that possibility, and from the results, it can be suggested that the employees to some extent, perceive themselves as change recipients.

However, when taking into account what the interviewees expressed regarding employee voice, other results can be concluded. Many employees attempted to voice their opinions or thoughts, but generally only those who voiced positive opinions were responded to. Other employees had more sceptical voice towards for instance the benefits of the change but were left unacknowledged. From that, it can be argued that they did not perceive their communicative role as change recipients. They rather had the role as for instance sceptics, as suggested by Madsen and Verhoeven (2019), as they actively used communication in their attempt to voice shortcomings or suggest improvements, without responses. Previous research has provided suggestions on that soliciting input can produce a number of benefits desired by managers (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois & Gallan, 2004). It can therefore be argued that the municipality risks failing to recognise valuable knowledge from the employees.

Lastly, in change processes, some employees are assigned the role as change agents (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019), because they are especially skilful at explaining the change and making sense of it for other employees. From this study, I therefore argue, that with the employees' knowledge and input that can enhance the organisation's innovation and function, they should not be called change recipients. Rather, they are the 'change makers' that make a change process possible and make sure it goes through. In the long-term, they make the organisations viable.

6.2 Contribution to research and practice

The study's most meaningful contribution to research within the field of strategic communication is the employee perspective. More specifically, the study provides insights into the employees' opinions and attitudes towards internal change communication during a planned top-down change process in a municipality. This study has therefore enabled a pluralistic view on concepts and theories that generally have been viewed from a management's perspective. In practice, this study might contribute with the insights that the much-discussed participatory approach in organisational changes involves more factors than having an 'open' communication at some stage of the process and inviting employees to a dialogue. It should involve, to a greater extent, employee voice and listening. Listening should be used as a strategic act in order to ensure the sustainability of the organisation. Employees should be able to provide positive but also critical or negative thoughts without risking being ostracised. Without this enabling, employees' participation becomes a superficial act in order to pacify them and hinder any resistant attitudes.

6.3 Limitations and future research

The findings of this study are limited due to the methodological approach. The empirical material consisted of interviews with employees where they were asked questions that requested that they would think back. For instance were they asked about their thoughts, opinions and reactions they had when they first heard about the contact centre. For some employees, years have passed since that happened. The retrospective interviews could therefore have caused a retrospective bias. Their thoughts or opinions at the start of the change process may thus have been influenced during the course of time. Furthermore, results are based on employees' self-reported perceptions of the organisational change process. A multimethod approach with the collection of supplementary data, in addition to self-reporting interviews in real-time, such as newsletters, intranet posts and observations, would provide knowledge about the process of planned change communication and an insight into the process' alterations as it progresses. Future research within this field should therefore strive for a multimethod approach to achieve comprehensive insights about the employees' perceptions during a change process.

As the study's empirical material consisted of interviews with employees within a municipality, their perception of a planned top-down change might be different than that of employees within a private organisation. Municipalities generally have political decisions to

work by. The contact centre is but one of many examples of that, and employees may have become accustomed to these kinds of change initiatives. As the interviewees mentioned, this was not the first political decision that they been presented, and it will not be the last. “*Working for a municipality means you have to accept these kinds of changes*”, as phrased by one employee. A suggestion for future studies is therefore to research the same topic as was the focus of this study but in a private organisation, or to study both and get a comparison between a public and a private organisation.

A final recommendation for future studies is to focus both on managers’ and employees’ perception of the planned change communication during a top-down change, in order to be able to compare the two groups’ opinions with each other. The reason for this study only focusing on the employees’ perspective is due to the lack of empirical data from that perspective. However, that decision does not signify that employees are more important than managers. Rather, I argue that focusing on both employees’ and managers’ perceptions could have benefits.

6.4 Concluding remarks

Based on the literature review, it was argued that studies within organisational changes have generally been conducted from the managements’ perspective. Although providing meaningful knowledge, studies from only the managers’ point of view have created a one-sided knowledge of strategic change communication. This study therefore aimed to generate knowledge on planned change communication from the employees’ perspective. The research questions that guided the study aspired to explore the employees’ perception of their communicative role in an organisational change. Furthermore, the questions aimed to examine how employees voice their opinions during planned top-down changes and how their voice is met by managers. The summarised conclusions from the analytical work suggest that, although recent literature points to the direction of increased employee power in organisations and during organisational change processes, the employees still seem to perceive their own role during changes somewhat as recipients. As regards employee voice during change initiatives, it can be proposed that employees that express positive voice and ask simple questions receive much more acknowledgement and response than do employees that are more negative towards a change or ask challenging questions. Further, it is concluded that managers filter crit-

ical employee voice, which in long-term, can hinder the organisation's development and viability.

7. References

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Agreement

This interview is conducted in order to provide empirical material to my master thesis in Strategic Communication at Lund University. The focus of the interview is to study the employees' perspective on organisational changes and how the employees perceive the internal communication during the change processes. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded in order to be transcribed afterwards, by me as a researcher. All answers will be treated anonymously. In case of direct quotes from the interview used in the thesis, care will be taken that any information that could identify you will not be revealed. My interest in the interview is to learn about *your* experience, thoughts and knowledge organisational change that you have gone through while working at this organisation. I therefore emphasise the fact that there are no right or wrong answers and encourage you to share the thoughts that come to your mind. You are free to choose to not answer a question or to withdraw from the interview at any time during the interview. If you have any questions now or during the interview, please do not hesitate to ask.

During this interview, the questions will refer to the implementation of a contact centre at [municipality's name].

Appendix 2

Interview guide

Introduction

1. How long have you worked at [municipality's name]?
2. What is your job?

Change communication

3. Can you tell me about the contact centre change that [municipality's name] is in the process of implementing?
4. Why does the contact centre have to be implemented?
5. Was it clear to you from the first announcement why the contact centre will be implemented?
6. How was the change announced to you and your colleagues?
7. How much longer before the process began did you hear about the change?

Sensemaking

8. How did the change affect you and your everyday work, if it has?
9. What was your reaction when you first heard about the implementation of a contact centre?
10. How did your colleagues react to the change announcement?
11. Did your reaction change over time?
 - a. Yes: How?
12. Have you been involved in the change process?
 - a. Yes: In what way?
 - b. No: Why not?
13. Can you share some of your key experiences regarding the change communication?

Employee voice

14. Are you satisfied with the opportunities you have had to provide input to your manager or the project managers regarding the contact centre?
15. In what context have you had possibilities to share your opinion?
16. If you have provided input to those in charge of the change, what has it been?
17. Through which channels have you provided input?
18. What do you think has been the most difficult part of the change?
19. Have you discussed these difficulties with your colleagues / manager / project managers? How?

20. How receptive did you experience your manager / project managers being in terms of listening and responding to you and your colleagues?
- a. Do you feel that they took your feedback further and used it to improve the change?

Resistance

21. What do you think about employees' negative opinions during organisational changes?
- a. Is that something you recognise?
 - b. How do you feel about unwillingness to change or negative opinions towards changes?
22. How do you feel that your colleagues react to changes?
- a. Do you feel that they react similar to you (positive / negative)?
23. What in the change process has been difficult? The change itself, or elements around it (e.g. you get more work to do that you do not have the time for)?
24. Have you participated in any training sessions or awareness projects regarding the change?
- a. No: Why not?
25. Do you think the contact centre is necessary?
- a. No: Why not?
26. Are you looking forward to the new contact centre?
27. Do you think your job will be easier or more difficult after the implementation of the new contact centre?
28. Do you think the change is to your best interests?

Appendix 3

LinkedIn post

Shared in March 2020

“Kära nätverk. Jag är i akut behov av empiriskt material till min masteruppsats i strategisk kommunikation vid Lund University.

Min studie fokuserar på intern kommunikation under organisatoriska förändringar utifrån medarbetarnas perspektiv, dvs. hur medarbetare upplever den interna kommunikationen under förändringens gång. Visst finns det mycket forskning kring ämnet, men fokuset har främst varit på cheferna. Eftersom medarbetare och deras kommunikation spelar en stor roll för förändringars resultat tycker jag det är viktigt att studera ämnet utifrån just deras perspektiv.

Jag söker därför med ljus och lykta efter ett eller fler företag/organisationer/skolor vars medarbetare jag kan intervjua (15 medarbetare, individuella- eller gruppintervjuer, ca 30 minuter varje intervju).

Vill din organisation delta eller har du tips om någon som vill så får du jättegärna kontakta mig. Denna statusen får såklart även gärna delas.

Tack så mycket på förhand.”